sit next to me before I go

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/61814908.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationship:
Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Additional Tags:
Fake/Pretend Relationship, Fake Marriage, Crossdressing, Pre-Canon

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-12-31 Completed: 2025-01-22 Words: 43,503 Chapters: 3/3

sit next to me before I go

by stereobone

Summary

As the bus doors swing shut, the man extends a hand to Gale.

"I'm John Egan, by the way," he says. "Figured my wife oughta know my name."

Gale smiles tightly.

Gale and John meet on a bus to San Antonio. It's an uneventful ride. Except for the gangsters, the stolen car, the cross-dressing, and the part where John and Gale pretend to be husband and wife.

Notes

this is an homage to the 1934 film *it happened one night* starring clark gable and claudette colbert, where they meet on a night bus and he pretends to be her husband while she's running away from her father. you don't have to have seen it in order to follow the fic, because other than the basic premise, this goes in a totally different direction, but i do honor an absolutely iconic scene from the film in the second part. this fic is finished and will be updated regularly!

many thanks to @steeseman for beta reading this first part, @weimarweekly for all the texas info, and to @swifty-fox for drawing art (!!) which will be revealed later and also chaining me to their radiator (spiritually) so that i wrote this ♥

Chapter 1

January, 1940

Gale isn't even out of Wyoming when things start to go wrong.

The bus makes a twenty-minute stop in Cheyenne, far from Casper, but not nearly far enough. Gale glances around the bus station and watches passengers amble about, everyone minding their own business. No one looking for anyone. He's spent the whole morning with a sour stomach and a nervous bladder. Now that they've stopped, Gale can't ignore how much he has to piss. He surveys the station again: the smell of diesel in the cold winter air, layers of red brick plastered with signs directing newly enlisted men to their buses. He grabs his suitcase and steps off the bus towards the bathrooms.

Gale almost walks into the men's room out of habit before he remembers.

He has no idea how he'd forgotten, given what he's wearing. Given the heels. An entire escape plan cooked up by Marge, a smart one too, just incredibly humiliating. He takes a deep, steadying breath to push the door open for the women's room and realizes he can't do it. He can't. Gale presses his lips together tightly and heads for the back of the bus station. There's a few trees, enough privacy that Gale can do what he needs to do. He sets down his suitcase in a bush and stumbles over to the trees so he can pee there. He shoves the clutch purse Marge gave him into the folds of his blazer and pulls off his gloves, holds those between his teeth. Then he lifts up his skirt, untucks his dick from his girdle, and pisses.

It's the most he's felt like himself in hours, pissing against a tree. Gale can hardly stand to look down and see his stream fall above the black heels, the fully-fashioned silk stockings. He only has to endure this until he gets to Denver. Then he can change his clothes, make sure he hasn't been followed, and buy another ticket to Texas. Part of what makes this plan work is that no one, not even Marge, actually knows where he's going. The ticket he bought at the Casper bus station only goes to Denver, a contingency—Casper is a small city. People talk.

Gale tucks himself back into the girdle and pulls his skirt down.

When he walks out from the trees, his suitcase is gone.

"No," Gale says, stomach dropping. "No, *no*."

He digs through the bush uselessly, cranes his body around the station wall in case there's a chance his suitcase is on the other side. It's not. Gale had nearly all of his money in that suitcase, and perhaps more importantly, his clothes. Men's clothes. The clutch purse holds seven dollars, not enough to buy new clothes. The only other things inside are his bus ticket, ID, lipstick, a compact mirror, and silver case full of toothpicks.

"Call me," Marge had said. "If anything goes wrong, call me, but only if it's absolutely necessary. They'll look for you here first."

Gale swallows. He can't call her. He can't notify the bus station, can't tell the police. Can't risk his father finding out. Gale walks back to the bus, still a little wobbly in heels, and shows his ticket to board again. He sits as far in back as he can as the bus doors close and they rumble their way towards Colorado.

He touches his face, the skin still smooth from shaving with a straight razor that morning, but he'll have to buy another, and fast. Christ, he'll have to figure something out. Because he can't go home.

Gale can't go home, and he won't.

When Marge suggested the idea, Gale immediately said, "I'm not doing that, Marjorie."

"Gale, be serious," she said.

"I feel like I'm the only one who is."

Marge rolled her eyes and held the outfit up to him again. A gray houndstooth blazer and skirt combo with a pearly shirt to match underneath and a red felt women's fedora. White gloves. A perfect disguise. Gale stood there, hidden in her bedroom, desperate and angry and half-considering the idea.

"Of course, your shoulders are broader," Marge said, all reasonable. "But I can fix that. And get you a wig and heels from the theater."

"Marge," Gale said.

A week ago, Gale's father told him he was getting married in two weeks' time to Esther Fennick. Gale had met her only a handful of times after coming home to Casper post-graduation in December. Apparently, she had taken a bit of a shine to him. There was nothing wrong with the girl, only that Gale didn't want to marry her, and on top of that, that she was Dale Fennick's daughter, and the Fennicks were gangsters. Which meant his father was gambling again. Which meant things were worse than before Gale left.

Which meant the marriage was a bargain. His father was selling him off to Dale's daughter to clear his debts.

"When they notice you're missing, they're going to tear this state apart looking for a young man on the run," Marge said. "But they won't find a young man on the run. Because you'll be a young woman."

She cocked her head and laid the outfit on the bed, then opened her sewing kit on the dresser and grabbed the measuring tape. Gale pressed his heels into the flooring. He started to feel there wasn't any other option. Fennick's men had been *watching* him, trailing him in their cars. They were parked across the street from Marge's right now to make sure Gale didn't do anything stupid.

He told his father after dinner yesterday that he didn't want to go through with the wedding. He didn't want to get married. "I know," his father said. "But we have responsibilities in this life, Gale. And this is yours." His breath was sour, burned Gale's nose. The weight of his hand on Gale's shoulder pushing him through the floorboards. Gale never said no to his dad. He stayed in Wyoming for school because his father wanted that. He sent him money. But doing *this,* getting married, seemed more than Gale could bear.

"Dad—"

His father slapped him. A drunken, sloppy backhand that still stung.

"No more of that backtalk," he said. "What's done is done."

Gale called Marge from a phone booth and she told him to come over in the morning. She had an idea. He didn't realize it would involve all this. Gale supposed if he only wore Marge's clothes to get out of Wyoming, it might not be so bad. He knew he had a softer face, for a man. He could fool people. Marge was kind enough not to say that to him. His father told him all the time he was soft. Gale, of course, knew exactly what he meant by that.

"What if I have to talk?" Gale asked. "My voice is deep, Marge. That won't fool anybody."

"Gale," she said, measuring tape stretching across his shoulders, "the first thing you need to know about being a woman is that the world doesn't want to hear you talk at all."

Gale frowned at her. He enjoyed listening to Marge. She was his friend, always had been. She brought the measuring tape to his waist and cinched it tightly.

"We'll have to get a brassiere too," she said. "But I think you'll fit my girdle."

Gale felt a knot form between his brows.

"You think I'll fit your what?"

The bus driver starts looking at Gale intermittently once they've passed the border into Colorado. It's making Gale sweat, despite the late January cold. He's worried that his beard has started coming in, but he checks his face in the compact mirror, and he's still smooth. The wig is fine as well, held in place by pins attached to the hat. Gale wonders if he's imagining the whole thing, driven to paranoia by the knowledge that he's only got borrowed clothes from Marge to hold him over until god-knows-when. He keeps his eyes on the seat in front of him.

It's late afternoon when they get into Ft. Collins, and this time, Gale decides to stay on the bus. A few passengers disembark. Gale has been lucky to have a seat to himself the entire ride so far, and he hopes to keep it that way. The bus shifts as more people get on, the winter air blowing through. Gale looks up and that's when he sees him—like Clark Gable himself walked right off the silver screen and onto the bus. He's wrapped up in a navy blue wool scarf and sports a pencil-thin mustache, laughing about something Gale hasn't heard, hat crooked on his head. He looks right at Gale and pauses in the aisle. Gale should look away. Knows he should. He doesn't for long enough to see how deep of a blue the man's eyes are, catch the lopsided smile he throws to Gale. He pulls his gaze to the window.

A woman and her young daughter walk by outside, shielding

themselves from the cold. The girl looks a bit like Gale's sister when she was younger. His eyes draw up again without his permission. The man in the scarf is hefting his suitcase onto the rack, ears pink from the cold, then adjusting his hat. Gale feels guilty for watching and caught out when the bus driver steps back onto the bus and heads right towards him, sure in his steps. Gale stares straight ahead like he can disappear if he doesn't make any eye contact.

It doesn't work.

"Alright, missy, I need to see some identification," the bus driver says. "You haven't said a word since we left Casper. You some kind of runaway?"

Gale clenches his jaw. He has his ID on him, the name there is Gale Winston Cleven. His ticket is under the name Gail Smith. His whole body is on fire with the certainty of humiliation. Jail. His father coming to drag him back home. Didn't Marge say that the world wasn't interested in women talking? They'd made contingencies, of course. Worked on Gale making his voice a little higher, coughing into his hand and faking a cold. He doesn't trust that to work right now, and the bus driver wants his ID. If he shows that, he's through.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" someone says.

Gale and the bus driver both turn towards the aisle. Clark Gable with his mustache and blue eyes is crowding the bus driver, arms crossed.

"What are you harassing my wife for?" the guy says. "She's very shy."

The bus driver starts stuttering just as Gale's brain goes stupid.

"Your—your wife—but I didn't—"

"I had to meet her here in Ft. Collins, work stuff, you know how it is," the guy says, then looks at Gale and says, "Sorry, sweetheart."

Gale stares at him. He's smiling, eyes half-crescents, face warm and apologetic like he really did have to make Gale meet him in Ft. Collins and he's awful sorry about that. Gale understands what he's doing, of course. He's as thankful as he is horrified. He manages to smile and nod. The man smiles wider. The bus driver looks between them both, clearly at a loss for words, before he finally closes his mouth.

"I'm sorry, sir," he says. "I didn't know—"

"Save your sorries, we're all good." The man pats the bus driver's shoulder. "Now if you don't mind, I'd like to sit next to my wife."

Then he does.

He sits right next to Gale like he doesn't plan on moving.

Gale doesn't know how to tell him to move, and quickly realizes that he can't. It isn't that the man seems like an outright creep or anything. But Gale wants to be left alone. He shouldn't have looked at him at all, because that sort of looking has always gotten Gale into trouble.

As the bus doors swing shut, the man extends a hand to Gale.

"I'm John Egan, by the way," he says. "Figured my wife oughta know my name."

Gale smiles tightly. Shakes his hand.

"And your name is?" John asks.

Gale bites his lip, remembers he's wearing lipstick and stops. Marge had shown him over and over again how to apply it, told him he at least had to do that much. Gale had stopped her short of trying to get him to put on eyeliner.

He opens the clutch purse and pulls out his bus ticket to show John.

"Gail Smith, huh?" John says. "Nice to meet you."

Gale tucks his ticket back into his purse and clicks it shut. He supposes the lack of conversation will get John to inevitably lose interest and change seats at some point. Not talking is strange, though Gale has been fairly quiet all his life. He can last another few days until he decides where he's going.

"You really aren't going to talk, are you?" John says. "Because of your voice?"

He's staring at Gale with an innocent curiosity. Gale stares back, keeps staring. When he doesn't respond, John says, "Because you don't want people to know you're a man—"

Gale has John's wrist in his hand before he can finish. He squeezes at the bones, hard.

"If you tell a single soul I'll break your wrist," he says.

The words spit out from between his teeth.

"Christ, I wasn't planning on it," John says.

He should look scared, Gale thinks, that some maniac in women's clothing is threatening to break his wrist, only he looks weirdly delighted, and Gale can't tell if John isn't taking him seriously, or is too fascinated by the situation to care. He lets go of John's wrist and folds his hands back in his lap. Can feel that John is still looking at him.

"So, what, did you really run away?" John's voice is lower now. "You in some kinda trouble?"

"It's my own business," Gale says.

"Aw, come on, Gail, I'm your husband."

Gale looks at him sidelong. John is wearing an easy smile, a little goofy, like it's no bother to him, he simply wants to know. Gale isn't about to tell him. He's an adult who knows how to handle himself. He sighs and looks out the window again. Colorado rolls past, the mountains snowcapped.

He wonders how John had known. All day, Gale has been on a bus, and no one has known. He has a wig on, for Christ's sakes, the victory rolls are perfect. Everything was supposed to be perfect. He's humiliated that John noticed, that he knows. Gale is just a man in a skirt sitting next to him now. Shame twists in his gut, then twists worse because John is handsome. Gale should never have looked at him. He bites the inside of his cheek and turns away from the window.

"How could you tell?"

John has a cigarette pinched between his teeth. He pulls it from his lips.

"I was looking, I guess." He clears his throat. "I suppose I saw your Adam's apple."

Gale touches his Adam's apple. The collar of Marge's shirt lines up to his throat, everything should be covered.

"Want my scarf?" John asks.

"I don't need any help," Gale tells him.

"Fine," John says, like Gale is being completely unreasonable. "Can I at least sit here?"

He finally lights his cigarette and takes off his hat. John has dark, wavy hair. An errant curl falls over his forehead. Gale fiddles with his gloves. Jesus, he hates this goddamn outfit. He doesn't know what to do with himself.

"You can sit wherever you want," he says.

"Gee, thanks," John says.

A few seconds later, he offers a cigarette. Gale shakes his head. It's probably better that John sits next to him anyway, at least until they change buses. The bus driver will let Gale alone for a while. John seems content to let Gale alone for a while as well. He pulls a rolled-up newspaper from his jacket and starts reading. The front headline reads about German bombers attacking the British coast.

Gale wants to fight. He'd decided the moment news broke about the war. All he had to do was finish school, stop home to see his mother for a while, then he could enlist. He'd written to Marge about his plans. Told his mother as well, with the promise spoken between them not to tell his father. At twenty-one, Gale was an adult. He could decide what to do for himself. His father didn't see it that way, and this winter had proven he never would. Gale was his child, his boy, and his best collateral.

"So, where are you headed?" John asks. "Can I know that much?"

He snuffs out his cigarette and folds the newspaper over his knee. He's got a long, broad body.

"Denver," Gale says, to stop himself from staring at the line of John's trousers. "Maybe east from there."

He doesn't know why he lies.

"*Maybe*," John says, but doesn't press for more. "I'm headed to Texas myself. Going to the air base."

Gale sits up straighter. "You're in the Army?"

"Sure am. Well, need to get there first."

John runs his hand through his hair in the first show of bashfulness

Gale has seen. Then he shrugs. Gives Gale another knowing look.

"Why, you planning to enlist?" he asks.

"Obviously not like this," Gale says, knot forming between his brows again.

"Which you still haven't explained."

"Nuts to your explanation," Gale says.

And John laughs. Really laughs, deep and somehow still boyish. Laughing as if Gale pulled it out of him. For the first time, Gale considers that John isn't just sitting next to him to give him a hard go, but is genuinely interested in his company. In helping. Gale still doesn't want to tell him what's going on. If Fennick's men do find him, Gale doesn't want to get John involved.

"You should come to Texas," John says. "San Antonio. You interested in the Air Force?"

Gale bites the inside of his cheek again. He doesn't say, *yes, I'm interested.* He doesn't say, *you're going to be a pilot? I want to be a pilot, I've always wanted to be a pilot.* He doesn't say, *I can't get to Texas, my suitcase was stolen, I barely have any money.*

Gale says, "You talk like some kind of loony, John."

And John laughs again, fingers drumming on the hard top of his hat.

"Nuts to your loony, Gail," he says.

Against all odds, Gale dozes off between Ft. Collins and Denver. He doesn't realize he's fallen asleep until someone shakes him awake. Gale startles, body moving with the bus, and grabs for the hand shaking his arm only to see it's John that's woken him up. Gale's heart thumps in his chest. He thought—for a moment he thought his father—but it's just John staring at him, lips turned down.

"Gail," he says.

Gale shakes himself awake fully.

"Sorry. Forgot where I was."

"No," John says. "It's not that. Your—you've got stubble coming in."

Gale presses his palms to his cheeks and stills, horrified. He does. There's stubble scraping over his palms, surely enough to be noticeable, or at least for the goddamn nosy bus driver to say something. He'll have to try and keep his head down while getting off the bus, or risk taking off his hat and shielding himself with that.

"Here," John says.

He unspools his scarf from around his neck and hands it over to Gale.

"Wrap it up around your face and no one will know. We're almost to Denver, anyhow."

Despite everything in him that wants to say no, Gale takes John's scarf. It's a horribly nice thing to do. Gale wraps the scarf high up on his neck and around and around until it covers his mouth right up below his nose. Outside is cold enough that he can get away with this. Gale nods a thanks behind the woolen fabric. It smells woody and sharp, like aftershave.

Denver rolls up in the next five minutes, lit by streetlights in the nighttime. The bus driver announces that they're stopping here for the night. There's lodgings available, and the ticket counter is still open for another half-hour in case any passengers are transferring. Gale breathes humid behind his borrowed scarf. This is the end of the journey for him right now. He doesn't have enough money to get a room, and he needs a new razor. He needs to figure out *something*.

John stands up first and grabs his suitcase from the rack. Gale follows behind him, nothing to hold except his clutch purse as they step off the bus. The Denver wind blows right through Gale's stockings and up his skirt. He wants to squeeze his legs together. Get back on the bus. He needs to thank John and find somewhere reasonably warm to sleep.

"John," he starts, right as John says, "Where's your suitcase?"

Another gust of cold wind renders Gale momentarily too stupid to answer the question quickly enough. John's mouth becomes a thin line.

"Where's your suitcase?"

Gale yanks the scarf down from his mouth. He hates John's tone, like Gale did something stupid, or lied, when it's none of his goddamn business in the first place. If he really wants to know, then Gale will tell him.

"Stolen in Cheyenne."

"Then where are you—oh, Jesus, Gail." John presses his thumb and forefinger against his eyes and rubs. "Don't tell me you were planning on sleeping in the bus station tonight."

"It's my own—"

"Your own business," John says. "You got some kind of religious thing where you can't ask for help?"

"You got some kind of religious thing where you have to offer it?" Gale sniffs, nose starting to run in the cold. "And for the last time, I don't need your help."

A few people look their way. They're standing on the bus platform, Gale remembers, and he's no longer being quiet. The last thing he needs is to draw attention to himself right now. Gale turns from John and heads for the doors of the station. There's heat in there. He only gets a few feet before he hears the click of John's shoes behind him, and it's only by the sheer advantage of not having to walk in heels that John manages to get in front of Gale.

"Why don't you want my help?" John says. "I've got a room for the night right next door. Two single beds. You can shave in peace and get a good night's sleep."

Gale wants to ask why on earth he even *wants* to help. He can't fathom why, least of all when Gale has been mostly cold to him the entire bus ride. The idea of sleeping in an actual bed tonight is tempting, though. Tempting, and probably smarter than sleeping in the station. If anyone is looking for Gale here, he'll be right out in the open in the station.

John is still looking at him, the question unanswered, his eyes imploring and sincere. Gale bites his lip. He's cold, and he's tired. But John has a right to know.

"Listen, I—you can't get involved," he says. "There are people after me. Gangsters."

John nods, thoughtful.

"That's no good," he says. "Feels like I'm already involved, though, seeing as I made myself your husband."

"Don't start with that again." Gale flushes under the scarf. How can John be joking about this? "I'm serious, John."

"So am I. Christ, that's some crazy business you're trying to mind all by yourself. Let me help. Okay?"

His eyes haven't changed since he first asked Gale why he didn't want his help. Imploring and sincere. The blue of them deeper under the yellowed lights of the station.

"Okay," Gale says.

John is staying at a hotel around the corner from the station. He grabs the key while Gale waits outside, then the two of them go into room four together. The room is warm and dark and there are two single beds like John said there would be. Gale wants to collapse into bed immediately. First, he kicks off his heels. He wants to change into something simpler and badly. He had no idea it was all so complicated for women to just get dressed. Not a thing he has on is comfortable, except the girdle. He's never worn anything like that before—the garment is constricting, only not in a way that's bothersome. Almost like Gale is being held together somehow.

"You can use the bathroom first," John says.

Gale is about to, then remembers that he doesn't have any other clothes. No robe, no pajamas. He's not about to sleep naked in front of John.

Someone knocks on the door to the room. John cracks the door open and Gale hears a woman say, "Here is the pajama rental for your wife, sir."

"Thanks," John says, and shuts the door again, locks it.

The tips of Gale's ears go hot, then his cheeks. The words *your wife* echo around in his brain over and over. John turns to him with a pair of folded pajamas and robe in his hands. They're satin.

"Your wife," Gale says.

He thinks John has the decency to blush.

"What else was I supposed to say? You're dressed like a dame and in my room!"

"I don't know," Gale says. "But you could've rented men's pajamas and said they were for yourself."

John frowns at the satin pajama top and bottom in his hands.

"Oh," he says. "I didn't think of that."

Gale wants to snatch the clothes from John and strangle him with them. He takes a deep breath instead and grabs the pajamas with less violence than that, because John rented them with his own money. He didn't have to do that. A long-sleeve top and pants are better than nothing at all.

"I'm using the bathroom now, John," he says.

John smiles. "Alright, Gail. Oh—want some toothpaste? I don't have an extra toothbrush, but it's something."

Gale closes himself in the bathroom with John's toothpaste and his pajamas. It's one of the more modern bathrooms, with a tub and everything. Gale won't even have to sneak down the hall later for a shower.

Alone, finally, Gale pulls his gloves off. Marge was so resourceful to get him all this, she always has been. Gale had thought about marrying her at one point in time, before he realized his tastes weren't normal. He still thinks about marrying her, even though it wouldn't be fair. But life isn't fair. He's known that for a good long while.

Gale unpins his hat and wig. His hair is a flat mess, so he shakes it loose, then rolls down his stockings carefully. If he rips those, he's really screwed, because he wasn't about to shave his legs. The stockings are another thing he doesn't mind. Gale's always had soda straw legs, too skinny by half. Stockings give him shape he didn't know he could have. He knows he shouldn't be thinking like this, he just can't stop noticing.

The skirt and top are next. Marge loosened some of the stitching, but the blazer and top are still tight around his broad shoulders, his arms

more defined from having worked the oil fields. He arranges the clothes and wig neatly on the hanger over the door. Then Gale stands there in nothing but the open-bottom girdle and brassiere.

He finds it strange that he recognizes his body so easily like this. He quickly unhooks the brassiere and drops it to the floor. It's left red lines on his skin around his chest and shoulders. The girdle has probably left lines as well, little marks like scars. Gale loosens the garter and untucks his dick, sore from having been pressed up against his lower belly for so long. Any underwear he had was in his suitcase so as not to ruin the line of the skirt. So was the cold cream to remove the lipstick. Gale turns on the sink.

There's a knock on the door.

"Hey. It's John," John says, as if Gale wouldn't know.

Gale smiles to himself and wets a tissue so he can scrub his lips clean. Close up, he can see that his beard isn't coming in too bad, mostly his mustache, and he can shave in the morning.

"What's your name?" John asks through the door. "I mean, your real name?"

"It's Gale."

"Your name is really Gail? Wait—it's *Gale*? Your fake name is the same as your real name? Just spelled different?"

Gale checks the tissue. The ply is all red and somehow his lips are still red as well.

"Yeah."

"That's no good at all," John says.

Gale chucks the tissue in the trash and wets another. More lipstick comes off this time, perhaps as much as Gale is going to get without putting soap on his lips. He grabs the pajama rental off the top of the toilet seat.

"It's my name, John. I'm keeping it. No one is taking that from me."

There's silence on the other side of the door. Gale pulls on the pajama bottoms, shivers at the feeling of the satin over his bare cock. He's sore and sensitive and the words *your wife* keep ricocheting in his

mind. The bottoms are a little short on him, but fit.

"Okay," John says. "Well, how about using my name for a while?"

"John? That's even worse."

"No, my nickname—Bucky."

Gale pauses with the pajama shirt halfway on. *Bucky.* That fits John, somehow. It's also the most ridiculous suggestion Gale's ever heard. He doesn't want or need another name. He buttons up the top, which is nice and loose, and shrugs into the robe.

"I can't be Bucky while I'm a dame," Gale says. "And that's your name, anyhow."

"You can be Buck, then."

That is *your name*, Gale thinks. He ties the belt of the robe and wipes at his lips again. The stain of color has faded more, but insists on lingering, mouth a deeper red than normal. He uncaps the toothpaste and squeezes some onto his finger.

"That's still no name for a dame," he says before he rubs toothpaste on his teeth and tongue.

"I'll only call you Buck when we're in private."

Gale pauses with his finger against his lips. He has no idea what to say to that. This is a one-night situation. Gale rinses his mouth out twice more before he's satisfied. He gathers his stockings and undergarments in his arms and manages the door open. John stands there in his pajamas and robe. When he sees Gale he takes a long, slow blink. Gale pushes his hair back from his forehead, bizarrely more self-conscious than he was dressed in a skirt and heels.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing," John says. "I just hadn't seen you—nothing."

John rubs at the back of his neck, one hand stuffed into the pocket of his robe. Gale is horribly aware of the lingering color on his lips. John points in the general direction of his bed where his open suitcase is yawning into the room.

"You want a drink? I've got some whiskey with me."

"I don't drink," Gale says.

"No shit?" That smile is back, like John is pleased about something. "You actually religious?"

"Don't you think you should've found that out before you married me?" Gale says.

He doesn't know why he says that. He steps around John to hide the brassiere and girdle under the bed and doesn't know why he does that either. It feels proper to. The girdle is Marge's and maybe she wouldn't want another man to take a close look at that sort of thing. He has no idea where she got the brassiere from. Behind him, John whistles short and low.

"Goddamn, Buck. You oughta warn people you can talk like that."

The name is round and fond in his mouth. Gale resists the urge to twists the stockings in his hands.

"I'm not religious," he says. "Just don't drink."

He folds the stockings and sets them on the side table so he won't ruin them. He refuses to turn around and see the look John is likely giving him. Gale takes off his robe and climbs into bed. John comes over and digs in his suitcase until he comes up with a little bottle of whiskey—about three-quarters full.

"And you don't smoke." John unscrews the cap and takes a swig. "But you're on the run from gangsters."

Gale can smell the alcohol immediately. He's used to the smell. Been around the sharpness of it all his life, in bars and parties and at home. Gale is still not used to being around alcohol in a room with one other person. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do with himself. How he should be.

"That's about the lay of things," he says, eyes on the bottle.

John hums around a mouthful of whiskey. He recaps the bottle after that, two nips seemingly all he wanted. Gale lets himself breathe again, didn't realize he'd stopped.

"Listen." John drops the bottle back in his suitcase. "Why don't you come to Texas with me? I can spot you the money for the bus ticket, couple of meals. We get you some better clothes once you're in the

clear from your gangsters and you enlist. Better than going it alone, right?"

Gale sits up against the headboard. Tries to think of which part of that to answer first. Surely, John doesn't want to ride all the way to Texas with him dressed as a woman? And he knows Gale is running from trouble, trouble he hasn't even really asked about. All Gale can think to say is that he doesn't need the help. As he opens his mouth to say so, John cuts him off.

"You don't need the help, I know," John says. "I'm just saying it could be fun."

Gale looks down at the sheets, a deep emerald green, freshly washed. John is placating him, he's not an idiot. Gale needs help and they both know that, but he's not saying the words, and Gale feels so immensely grateful he can't speak for almost a minute.

"You'd be riding to Texas with a man dressed like a woman."

"With my lovely wife Gail," John says, tapping the side of his nose. "We're married, remember?"

Gale's pelvis tightens and he ignores that the best he can.

"You're serious."

"Sure I am, Buck. It's a great cover."

Across from him, John shrugs. Gale doesn't think John understands what he's really saying. What he's implying. Gale will be his wife, at least in public, people will look at them and think things, imagine things that Gale hardly lets himself imagine. If they got caught, John would likely be discharged before he even got to basic. And Gale won't be himself, not entirely, at any rate. John must sense his hesitation, because he says, "Sleep on it, yeah?"

He sets the alarm clock and switches out the lights.

"I'll sleep on it," Gale says into the darkness.

The room is empty when Gale wakes. Panic clutches his chest as he scrambles upright in bed, the realization that he's been abandoned,

and his meager belongings probably stolen as well until Gale sees John's suitcase at the foot of his bed. The door is also ajar, light from the hallway spilling into the room. Probably what woke Gale up, since the alarm hasn't gone off yet. Gale can hear someone talking lowly in the hallway. Sounds like John.

Gale slips out of bed quietly and presses close to the door. John's voice is a little clearer now, still soft, gentle. Gale risks pushing open the door a bit more and sees John's broad back a few feet away down the hall, tucked in his robe and talking on the hotel telephone.

"Is Ma there?" A pause. "She won't even come to the phone? No, it's fine, Lucy, it's—just tell her I said hello? And Louise, too. I gotta go—"

Gale backs away from the door and climbs onto his bed. John comes in the room again a few moments later, notices that Gale is awake and smiles, lopsided and sleepy.

"Morning, Buck," he says, and shuts the door.

That curl of hair is back over his forehead. Gale realizes that he knows almost nothing about John. Doesn't know where he's coming from, how old he is, if he has a girl, all the things that matter. He suspects that Lucy is John's sister. He wants to ask if John is okay and finds he doesn't know how.

"Morning," he says.

"You figured out what you're going to do yet?" John asks. "Or do you need coffee first before that sort of decision making?"

Gale checks the alarm clock. Another half hour before it's set to go off at seven. There's something terribly endearing about John waking up before the alarm to call home. He seems so human all of a sudden, less like Clark Gable who walked onto Gale's bus like some kind of screwball dream and more like...just John. Bucky.

"I figured I'll ride with you to Texas," Gale says. "If it's still not too much trouble."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be trouble, but you should ride with me anyhow."

Gale smiles despite himself, and just manages to hide his teeth.

"John, are you ever serious?"

"I'm always serious." John crosses the room to the bathroom, hands shoved in the pockets of his robe, casual. He pauses before closing the door and ducks his head, eyes on nothing. "Thanks for riding with me, Buck."

He shuts the door before Gale can think that he should be the one saying thank you.

After John showers, Gale opens up his purse and shows John the cash he's got left. John points to the silver case.

"What's in there?" he asks.

"Just toothpicks."

Gale doesn't elaborate. John doesn't ask him to. Gale gives him half his cash and John buys a toothbrush and shaving kit for him at the corner store. Then Gale showers, shaves with his new straight razor, and gets back into his disguise. He tries to think of the whole get up less as clothes and more of a disguise. That's easier, somehow, and strangely thrilling.

He tucks his straight razor into his clutch purse and lets John pack the toothbrush in his suitcase. They have forty-five minutes left to catch breakfast downstairs. Gale hasn't eaten since yesterday, but he finds the girdle makes it hard to eat too much. He grabs his heels and frowns at the way his stockings have bunched at the ankle. Gale glances at John, finds him rummaging through his suitcase, distracted. He pulls his skirt past his knee and yanks the right stocking tighter, then re-rolls the welts.

"Why didn't you hook them?" John asks.

Gale stills. Shoving his skirt down now would seem juvenile. He stares at his legs instead, encased in opaque silk.

"My mother always rolled hers."

"Skirts are too short nowadays for that, Buck. You gotta hook the garter clips into the keyholes."

Gale reaches up his skirt and grabs the dangling garter clips. He's been

letting them just sit loose against his thighs. He supposes this will stop his stockings from sagging, but now he has to figure out how to get the clip into the keyhole of the stocking. Marge hadn't showed him and he was too proud to ask. Gale unrolls his right stocking and pinches the clip open, blindly feeling around to hook it into the keyhole.

"Here," John says.

He bends to one knee and grabs for the welt of Gale's stocking, fingertips brushing over Gale's thigh. Gale jumps away from him so fast he nearly falls over.

"Jesus, John—"

"I'm only trying to help—"

"That's my leg."

John watches him from bended knee. Gale's skin still holds the memory of John's fingertips. The bedside alarm clock ticks the seconds away.

"Goddamn, Buck, you're actually shy, aren't you?"

John says this like he's uncovered a new fact, something to catalogue and hold. Gale wants to deny the words even though they're not an accusation. He's not used to being touched so casually.

"Listen, we'll miss breakfast going on like this," John says. "Let me hook the keyhole. I know how."

Gale can imagine why. John has probably helped dozens of women back into their clothes after bedding them. All that charm and whiskey and his boyish smile. Gale takes a steadying breath and steps into John's space again. Hikes up his skirt. John looks at him briefly, his eyes wide and grateful, then he pulls up Gale's right stocking again. His knuckles brush over the hair on Gale's thighs. Gale holds himself very still. Watches as John hooks the garter clips through the keyhole at the front, and feels it as he hooks the back. The straps of the clips rest tighter on Gale's upper thighs now. John does the same with Gale's left stocking, one hand holding onto Gale's thigh for leverage as he pulls the strap down. His thumb is inches away from the bottom curve of Gale's ass, but John keeps his touch practical. Gale thinks he could pass out from how rigid he is. He forces himself to think of nothing.

"There ya have it," John says.

His hands drop from Gale's thighs.

"Breakfast?" he says.

Gale nods, which is all he can manage. John stands and grabs his suitcase, then turns back around and says, "You should shave your legs, Buck, really commit."

And Gale finds his voice again very quickly. John makes his tongue loose.

"I'll be sure to think on it, Bucky," he says.

They're back at the bus station in less than forty minutes, full up on eggs, toast, bacon, and coffee with no sugar due to rationing. Gale grabbed a toothpick from the dining room for his collection, even though he hasn't been able to use one since he left Casper. Marge told him it wouldn't be very ladylike. Denver is sunny that morning, and the station is bustling despite the cold. John had handed Gale his scarf before he could argue with him about it. What Gale really wants to do is wrap the thing around his legs.

He waits in line with John to buy a ticket to San Antonio. His stomach is tight with anticipation, the irrational fear that they won't get a ticket somehow. The bus is too full or something else will simply go wrong. John mentions wanting to buy the paper and Gale is happy to get one for him so he doesn't have to stand in line waiting.

"You're a doll," John says, and drops a nickel into his gloved palm.

Gale snorts and heads to the newspaper stand. He sets the nickel on the counter and grabs a paper, stands up feeling like something cold is crawling down his neck. Gale turns slowly. He's there, ten feet away. Bill Fennick. Dale's brother, Gale thinks, he can't remember exactly, but he recognizes him enough to know he's a Fennick. His face has appeared in the driver's window of a Buick more than once following Gale around Casper. And he's looking around the station right now.

Gale walks as calmly as he can to the phone booth and inserts enough change to be connected to the operator. He asks for Marge's number.

The line rings, and rings, then Marge's voice answers.

"Hello?"

"Marge," Gale says, soft as he can manage.

"Oh, Betty, hello," she says.

Gale grabs the phone cord in his hand and squeezes. They'd developed a code in case he called and someone was there. *Betty* means a Fennick is there right now.

"How many?" Gale asks.

"I'm busy at the moment, but maybe we could go to the pictures this Sunday around two o'clock?"

Two o'clock. Two men at her house.

"Are you safe? Do they know?"

"You don't say." Marge's voice is light and happy. "I had no idea those two were going together. They don't seem like a good match."

They don't know that Marge helped him, then. Gale breathes. He couldn't forgive himself if something happened to Marge because of him. He checks out the smudged window of the phone booth. He swears under his breath when he realizes that he's lost sight of Bill.

"Gale," Marge says. Her voice is now a harsh, rushed whisper. "If you're still in Denver, get out of there now."

The line disconnects. Gale sets the receiver back on the cradle and steps out of the booth. He startles when John swims into view, smiling and holding a ticket.

"There you are," he says. "Thought I lost you. Got your ticket."

Gale checks over John's shoulders quickly. Nothing. No Bill. Maybe he didn't see him, probably wouldn't have recognized Gale like this anyway.

"You okay?" John asks.

"Yeah," Gale says. "Got your paper."

He trades the newspaper for his bus ticket. Denver all the way to San

Antonio. The name printed on the ticket is "Gail Egan." Gale's whole body goes flush. Any comment he thinks about making goes dumb in his mouth when he sees that John is idly flipping through the paper and muttering to himself about the goddamn Nazis. Of course he'd give Gale his last name. They're pretending to be married.

"Come on," Gale says. "We should get seats before the bus gets too crowded."

John rolls up the newspaper, shoves it into his coat, and says, "Of course, sweetheart."

The bus is miserably crowded. Gale and John are lucky they get on early enough to sit close to the back and together. Talking is going to be an issue, though. Gale doesn't think he can maintain a higher voice and doesn't want to risk it. He takes the window seat and freezes up when he catches sight of Bill again. He's talking to a police officer. He looks over at the bus Gale is sat on. Gale's body starts preparing itself for something, every cell aware of itself. Then Bill waves at the officer and walks the opposite direction of the bus station. Gale watches, full up with adrenaline still, only relaxing when Bill is long out of sight.

"Gale," John says. "You good?"

Gale turns from the window and nods. He points to John's newspaper.

"You want to read when I'm through?" John asks. "Oh, wait—"

He digs into his coat and pulls out a pencil and several pieces of scratch paper.

"Asked the guy at the ticket counter for some paper in case the bus was crowded," he says. "I'm not all that good with sign language, so...I figured you could write to me if you wanted to talk."

He's got a sheepish look about him, like he's not sure whether this was a stupid idea or not. It makes Gale fond of him, more fond than he's realizing he already is. He could kiss John right here and now and no one would blink an eye because they're husband and wife. John would care, though. Gale is fairly certain that John would care a whole lot. And he knows that he should tell him he saw one of the men that's after him at the bus station. He knows a whole lot about himself that's

ugly. Because he isn't going to say a thing.

Gale takes the pencil and a piece of scratch paper from John's hand. He writes *thank you,* at the top.

John smiles, mouth crooked, teeth hidden, and ducks his face into his newspaper.

The bus pulls away from the station.

Gale's mother took him and his sister on a bus up to Lemmon once to visit family. The whole thing felt so exciting, an adventure, vendors walking up and down the aisle selling chocolate and peanuts they couldn't afford to buy, but Gale loved it all anyway. He sat between his mother and sister and watched passengers sing a song he didn't know as they chugged north. All of them happy. Things were good, back then. Gale didn't know any better.

In Lemmon, a neighbor let his uncle fly an autogyro across a field. Gale watched the plane turn with his sister's small hand clutched in his own, mesmerized. The noise, the way the autogyro seemed to glide through the air, the whole thing was like magic. Gale wanted inside the plane. He wanted in the blue sky, all by himself, to fly across a field and up further still, until he was in the clouds.

That was the last time they'd gone to Lemmon. His sister lives in Montana now, married to a rancher. Gale's uncle died five years ago after falling off a ladder. His mother has nowhere to go. His father likes her home. He likes Gale home, too.

When Gale thinks about flying, he is always flying away from something, not towards anything else.

They write notes back and forth as the bus rolls along to Colorado Springs, so crowded that some passengers are standing in the aisles. John has wide, blocky handwriting that cramps the scratch paper,

lead smudging the side of his hand. Turns out he's twenty-four years old and from Wisconsin, some place called Manitowoc, which is strange, because Gale thought from his accent he was raised on the east coast. He loves baseball, the Yankees specifically, and watching *The Three Stooges* shorts at the pictures . Half the time, John can't get his words onto the paper before running out of room and talks instead.

"I got in trouble in school all the time for talking," he says. "That kid in the corner with the dunce cap? Me."

He jabs his thumb to his chest proudly. Gale rolls his eyes, but he's smiling.

What about your family? he writes.

2 sisters, John writes. He pauses, taps the pencil against the paper, then writes, *younger.* He looks like he's wrestling with something serious, mouth moving back and forth. Gale wonders if he's considering how to broach the topic of his mother.

"I don't think I've had to go this long without talking since I was last at mass," John says.

Gale flicks his arm and motions for the paper and pencil back. His own handwriting is neater, thin but long. Some of his words and John's have begun to blend together on the paper.

"My ma, you know, she's a good woman," John says. "I took care of her when my dad stepped out on us. She's having a hard time with me leaving. I want to do right by her."

John nods, more to himself than to Gale, somewhere back in Wisconsin, in a house Gale can cobble together in his mind with dark-haired sisters and a tired mother. This is not the sort of thing to write down on a piece of paper in the middle of a crowded bus. Gale writes, *you're doing just fine, John,* and hands the paper back over. John stares at the paper for a long time, then folds that one over and tucks it into the pocket of his coat.

He hands a fresh piece of paper over to Gale and says, "Alright, your turn. Tell me everything."

Gale can't think of what to write at first. His everything feels like nothing.

I'm from Wyoming, he writes. *Casper.*

John steals the pencil to write, *A cowboy!* and Gale can hear the tease of his voice in his handwriting. Gale shakes his head and snatches the pencil back.

Younger sister married out in Montana now. Mother and father still at home.

Gale knows it's very little. The bare minimum he could give. John still hasn't asked Gale what he's run from or why, either out of disinterest, or the understanding that Gale doesn't want to share. He seems to sense that Gale doesn't want to share about his family now, because he draws four overlapping lines on the paper and an 'O' in the upper right hand corner before handing the paper back to Gale.

They play five rounds of tic tac toe before the bus stops in Colorado Springs.

Every round ends in a draw.

The bus driver announces thirty minutes for lunch before they depart again. Gale isn't keen on the bus stopping, despite being hungry and tired of sitting and everything else. He can't shake the feeling of Bill Fennick trailing him. Gale follows John off the bus and scans the area. No one rushes him, no one calls out his name. He inhales and tugs John's elbow once they're clear of the bus terminal.

"John, I've got to go," he says.

"Go where?" John says.

Gale gives him a hard look.

"*Oh,*" says John. "How are you...uh...how have you been...handling that?"

"Keep a lookout while I go behind the station."

John walks with him to the back of the station. Colorado Springs is flatter and there's less tree coverage, but Gale still doesn't think he can walk into the women's room. It just isn't right. He sighs and stands with his back brushed up against John's like they're two guys using

urinals in a crammed bathroom. Can feel John craning his neck left to right. Gale pulls his gloves off and hands them over to John along with his clutch purse.

He's in the middle of peeing when John says, "I gotta say, this is not exactly what I envisioned when I pictured my future married life."

"Can it," Gale says.

He shakes his dick and tucks himself back into the girdle as John snorts. He hands Gale his purse and gloves.

"It wasn't a complaint, Buck."

Gale hates John when he does this. The flirting, or whatever this might be. Gale doesn't know if John Egan is the marrying type, and if he is, he'd be marrying a woman, a real woman, not Gale with his dick tucked in a girdle and his unshaven legs itching against his stockings. Gale goes into the restaurant in a bit of a rotten mood, made all the more rotten when the host ignores him completely and asks John if it'll just be him and his wife dining in today.

"Yessir, just me and the wife," John tells him.

He puts a hand on the small of Gale's back and Gale attempts to smile demurely, or at least in some way that doesn't telegraph that he wants to commit bodily harm. They're seated and order two club sandwiches immediately so they can eat and get back to the bus platform in time. Plates clatter together in the kitchen. Gale peeks through the porthole doors and sees nothing but men cooking. Out the restaurant windows, people moving, buses parked. John touches his hand where it's resting on the table and Gale almost jumps out of his seat.

"Gale. You okay?" he asks.

Gale takes a drink of water. Then he lies.

"It's these damn heels. You ought to try walking in them." He keeps his voice a low, harsh whisper.

"I would, but I don't think we're the same size."

John says it like he really would, no hint of a joke in his tone. His hand is still on top of Gale's. An elderly woman and her husband pass their table, the woman smiling.

"What a lovely couple you make," she says, eyes crinkled behind her glasses.

"Thank you," John says.

Gale snatches his hand away the moment she's gone out the door. John's lingers over the table. Their sandwiches are untouched. And it doesn't matter because Gale is pretty sure that John has cottoned on to what's bothering him. He moves his hand and takes a slow bite of his food, chewing leisurely before leaning back in his chair.

"Who'd you call back in Denver?" he asks.

John is too smart not to know. Gale is only surprised he didn't ask right then, when he caught Gale coming out of the phone booth.

"A friend back in Casper. Her name is Marge."

"She your girl?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Gale says.

He picks a fry off his plate and chews. John continues to watch him, patient, and Gale knows he has to tell him. On the off-chance that Bill or any other Fennick saw him in Denver and followed him here, he has to tell John. He owes him that.

"I saw one of the men that's after me in Denver," Gale says. "But I don't think he recognized me."

"You don't think he did," John says. "But you're still worried he might have followed you here."

Gale nods. And still, John doesn't ask why. That makes Gale furious and he doesn't know the reason for it, why John won't just pull the thing out of him. He remains patient. Waiting. Gale can't hold it all in anymore.

"My dad," he says, and it all comes spilling out of him. The drinking. The gambling. The debts. Gale staying in Wyoming to take care of things. His sister refusing to have anything to do with their father anymore. And now finally, the marriage to Esther Fennick. The reason John found Gale on a bus in Ft. Collins dressed as a woman in the first place.

Gale takes another drink of water once he's finished talking. He finds

that his appetite is completely dead. Across from him, John looks like he's shaking, and Gale realizes a moment later that John *is* shaking. Gale doesn't know why.

"John," he whispers.

"Jesus," John says, snapped back into the present. "Jesus, Gale, I'm—I don't even know what to say."

There's nothing to say, Gale thinks. This is simply how it is. John scrubs both hands over his face, still shaking. Angry, Gale realizes. He's *mad,* and it takes too long for Gale to understand that John isn't mad at him, but at his dad. He doesn't understand that until John says the words.

"Your dad's a fucking piece of work, doing a thing like that to his kid."

Gale still isn't sure what to say, has nothing to offer except, "He's my dad, John."

"Exactly. He shouldn't be doing this to you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Gale says. "It's nothing I can't handle."

Gale's mouth moves for him. He speaks and watches himself speak. He's said these words before, to Marge, to his sister, to a teacher at school who questioned a bruise. They are words he's said enough times that he is almost sure he believes them. John is rigid now across from him, the angry lines of him smoothed out into something understanding, and that is somehow worse.

"That what he tells you?" John says. "That you can handle it?"

Gale's body jumps out of his seat. Locked up enough that he can't speak, so he moves instead, out of the restaurant and into the cold Colorado air where he should be able to breathe, and yet can't. He goes to the bus platform and shows his ticket to the waiting bus driver, who says, "Thank you, Mrs. Egan," and steps aside to let him on. Gale barely hears him. The bus is only partially full. Gale takes the same seat from before, body moving from weightlessness to heaviness.

That what he tells you? That you can handle it? Gale's jaw flutters. John had no right to say those things, act like Gale is some kind of victim to his own father in need of rescuing. He *can* handle it, and he's been handling it ever since he can remember. John's never met Gale's

father, admitted that his own stepped out, so what could he possibly know about the situation?

When it comes down to it, Gale and John barely know each other. For John to imply that Gale's father—for him to—Gale can't even think the word. He massages the edge of his jaw to encourage the bone and muscle to release. His father gets into trouble and Gale helps him because he's his son. Sometimes he hits the bottle too hard. Sometimes the bottle hits Gale. Gale has never needed to be rescued from his dad. The situation isn't what John is imagining.

John boards the bus again and takes a hesitant seat next to Gale. He's holding something wrapped in wax paper that he passes in Gale's direction.

"Saved your sandwich," he says.

Gale takes the sandwich. He's hungry, thankful, and still angry. John seems like he's also peeved, though Gale can't figure why. Maybe he regrets agreeing to this now that he knows the truth of the situation, and the two of them are stuck together until they get to San Antonio. Gale unwraps his sandwich and takes a bite as John stews with his arms crossed. He looks petulant, a little pouty, and despite everything, Gale still finds him ridiculously handsome.

"I'm sorry," John says. "Okay? Shouldn't have said all that. Still a rotten thing for a father to do."

"Drop it," Gale whispers.

He doesn't want to talk about this anymore. His insides feel scraped raw. John can't be right and Gale won't let him be. He forces down more of his sandwich as the rest of the passengers return to the bus.

"*Fine,*" says John. "It's dropped. Enjoy your sandwich, sweetheart."

Gale has a brief, absurd thought that this is their first fight as a married couple. He takes a larger bite of his sandwich. The driver announces that they're heading out again. They'll pass all the way through Colorado now without stopping until they get to the panhandle of Oklahoma for dinner, then ride overnight into Texas.

Gale prepares himself for a long, silent ride.

The ride is not silent at all. John makes friends with just about everyone on the bus, yapping and singing and sharing cigarettes. They all want to know what he did to make his wife look so upset.

"Oh, so it's my fault?" John says, and a man says, "You must be newlyweds—it's always the husband's fault." There's raucous laughter. John puts his arm around Gale's shoulders and smiles. He's eating this up. Of course he is. Then he tells them all to leave Gale alone. She doesn't like a lot of attention. The same man who called them newlyweds says that Gale ought to be used to the attention, because she's an absolute dish. Gale shifts in his seat, John's arm flexing where it's still draped over his shoulders.

"She's the most beautiful dame you'll ever see in your life," John says. "But let's leave the looking to me."

There's a bit of a warning in his tone. The attention tapers off after that. When John looks at him, eager for some kind of approval, Gale can't give him anything. Can't let go of earlier yet and isn't sure if he wants to. His stomach won't stop flipping over and his head won't stop replaying disjointed moments from his childhood. *That what he tells you?* John moves his arm from Gale's shoulder and doesn't do anything else save offer him his scarf again when evening rolls around.

Then finally, they stop in Oklahoma.

This is the last stop before they drive overnight into Texas. A little stretch of the Oklahoma panhandle with barely anything around them except flatlands that reminds Gale of Wyoming some. A few bare trees scattered in the darkness like hands reaching out of the earth. The bus station is the smallest one Gale has been to yet, but there's a roadside grill open for dinner, and the station bathrooms are single stalls.

He steps off the bus with John. The two of them haven't spoken in hours. John is quiet now, stretching his cramped limbs in the open. Gale wouldn't blame him if he didn't sit next to Gale the rest of the way to San Antonio. Gale himself isn't sure he wants to be on a bus with John at all. He'd accepted his help out of desperation, some misplaced sense of adventure that John seems to have taken as total helplessness. Gale can't stand the thought of John looking at him like that. Of thinking that Gale is some kind of victim.

John presses a palm to the center of Gale's back and says, "Bathroom

is free. You should go in for a shave. I'll watch the door."

"Yeah," Gale says quietly.

They don't look at each other. John gets the shaving kit out of his suitcase. Gale already has the razor in his purse. He locks the door behind him and unwraps John's scarf in the dim light of the bathroom. The mirror is dingy and warped and Gale will be lucky if he doesn't cut himself. He has to be quick. He brushes the shaving cream on his face and draws the razor over his skin, the sink running, half-listening for John. Manages not to nick himself in the process. Gale splashes some warm water on his face and hides everything in his purse before unlatching the door.

John isn't there.

There's a half-smoked cigarette still burning on the ground near Gale's feet. John could be anywhere else, chatting with another passenger, ordering them dinner, but Gale knows. Somehow, he knows John is in trouble.

His organs swell up into his throat. He looks around the bus station, frantic, trying to look calm and feeling anything but. There's a Buick parked on the opposite side of the road, and Gale knows that Buick. Something in him screams to run, go into the restaurant where there are people. There's safety. He doesn't do that. He grabs the straight razor out of his purse and walks towards the car. Gale doesn't think or breathe. He just walks.

There's an old shack leaning sideways by the Buick. Gale gets about twenty feet away from that when he hears voices. Pauses. His heels are clicking on the pavement. He walks slower.

"You're talking out of your hat, pal," Gale hears.

That's John's voice. Gale pauses again. Another voice comes in, deeper, some of the consonants cut off. A Wyoming accent. Can't be anyone other than Bill.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," John says.

"Oh yeah?"

"*Yeah.*"

Gale gets onto the grass and flattens himself against the shack. He drags his body along the old wood until he's at the edge and can see John standing with his hands up. Bill Fennick holding a pistol to him.

"Enough games," Bill says. "I told you I'm here for the Cleven kid, not you. Where is he?"

John shrugs pleasantly. "I don't know any Cleven."

"You think you're real smart, don't you?" Bill grabs John's collar with his free hand and shoves him, sends John tumbling to the ground. Then he kicks John in the ribs and gets over top of him with the gun. "You know a Cleven now?"

John tries to curl in on himself, but he's trapped by Bill's knees. He coughs once, wincing, hurt. He smiles.

"I'm telling you the truth—I never met a single person named Cleven."

Bill cocks the gun, or maybe he doesn't, Gale can't think or see anything other than the pain in John's expression. He throws himself out from behind the shack with no sound. His knees hit the ground. Gale doesn't feel that. He grabs Bill's chin and forces his neck up. Presses the razor to his throat.

"Touch him again and you're dead," he says.

He knows that's his own voice, and yet Gale doesn't recognize it. He swears he can feel Bill's pulse against the blade of the razor. All that life rushing there, and if he slices, it'll be gone. Gale terrifies himself by considering pressing the blade in. Bill tenses up, says, "Whoa, hey, whoa—" Gale cuts him off by pressing the blade harder against his throat.

"Give him the gun," he says.

Bill shakes against him. Swallows. Gale feels that, too. He watches Bill's fingers go lax, the gun swinging down so it's no longer pointing at John. He hands the gun over. John grabs the pistol and scrambles to his feet, finger curled over the trigger, other hand covering his ribs.

"Okay, I got him, let him up," he says.

Gale doesn't move. He's got Bill's jaw gripped tight in his hand, head forced back, the line of his throat so vulnerable. He hates him. Hates him for pointing the gun at John, for scaring him, for forcing the

animal inside of Gale out, because he's not sure he can coax it back in.

"Buck," John says. His voice is soft, reassuring. "Let him up. I've got him."

Gale shakes his head, suddenly terrified. "He—"

"I know," John says.

Gale moves the razor from Bill's throat. As he stands, John brings the butt of the pistol down on Bill's head, a thick thud that drops him to the grass and leaves. A trickle of blood leaks onto the grass. Gale and John both stare at his unconscious body.

"Keep an eye on him," John finally says. "I'll check his car."

He hands Gale the pistol, bends down and fishes through Bill's pockets until he finds his car keys. Bill breathes shallowly, body heavy and limp. John looks at Gale and says, "I'll be right back."

Time stays slow once John disappears to the street. Gale keeps his eyes on Bill's limp body, feels as if the two of them have floated off the plane of the earth together, Gale forced now to face the thing he's been telling himself isn't true.

When John comes back, he's holding thick, white rope, and he says nothing, and doesn't have to. They both know who the rope was intended for. Gale's stomach lurches. John ties Bill's hands and feet together with the rope and Gale is glad for it, because he doesn't want to touch him. Wants as far away from this as possible, and John as well. John stands up and winces again, hand ghosting over his ribs.

"Jesus, you're hurt," Gale says.

"I'm fine, but the bus left us."

He's not fine, none of this is fine, but Bill will wake up, likely soon, and alert someone in the family, or follow them.

"His car," Gale and John say at the same time.

John doesn't argue Gale taking the keys and going to the driver's side. He doesn't comment when Gale sits down and his skirt rides up to a near indecent height, simply stows his suitcase in the backseat. He empties the bullets from the gun before shoving it in the glove compartment. Gale starts the Buick up and drives. Fast. He needs out

of here, not even sure he's going the right direction of Texas, just following his gut instinct, foot pressing the pedal down.

"I can drop you somewhere," Gale says. "Or try and catch the bus."

John is gripping the door handle. He swallows and says, "Why?"

"Bucky."

Because you could have died, Gale wants to say. His dad almost got John killed. *He* almost got John killed. This isn't normal. John was right—no dad should be doing this to their kid. And Gale knows that means he's not normal. The way he acted back there, more animal than man, and John saw everything.

"Buck," John says, smiling, then waves frantically at the windshield. "Christ, watch the road!"

Gale swerves back into his own lane and ignores the horn blaring at him from the other car that passes. John presses a palm to his forehead.

"Do you have a license?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because you're in two lanes—" John squeezes his eyes shut as Gale takes a corner, maybe a touch too fast, the wheels squealing. "—Buck, maybe you should let me drive."

John opens his eyes, then hisses through his teeth, hand favoring his ribs. That seems to be the only thing bothering him. That, and Gale's driving. Like a pistol in his face didn't matter at all. Gale ignores the warmth spreading through his chest, the leftover adrenaline from holding the razor to Bill's throat, the specter of his childhood reshaping itself into something he doesn't know how to look at. He ignores everything except John being squeamish in the passenger seat.

"That's very old-fashioned of you," he says. "You don't approve of women driving?"

"Oh, Buck, sweetheart, don't make me laugh right now," John says. He's got a hand over his eyes, but he's smiling. "Do you always drive like this?"

"Yes," says Gale, far too pleased at how easily he riles John up.

He presses his foot down harder on the gas.

He spends most of the drive trying to decide if it's worse for Bill to die of exposure or free himself and come after them. Gale starts to think either one doesn't matter after about a half hour. Both options are bad. He thinks of the rope that Bill had stored in the car, somehow worse than the gun. Gale's dad must have known.

His father had called Gale during his second year of college and begged Gale to wire him fifty dollars. Gale took the bus home to give his father the money himself, because he didn't trust his father wouldn't gamble it away, and showed up to find his mother outside smoking a cigarette with her mascara running down her face. Gale went inside without a word to her. His dad was asleep on the couch. He woke up smiling when he saw Gale, proud, all of that falling away when he saw the money.

"It's not enough anymore," he said. "I told you to wire the money for a reason, dammit."

He shoved Gale, liquor limbed, so Gale didn't fight back, but when he shoved again Gale fell into the coffee table. His elbow landed on a whiskey tumbler and shattered it, shards of glass pricked into his skin. His father froze.

"Gale," he said. "Gale, are you alright? Let me see—I didn't mean it, son, I didn't mean it."

"I know," Gale said, and let him pull the glass out.

He doesn't think his father has ever truly meant it, and *that* is worse. Gale tightens his hands on the steering wheel, knuckles probably white under his gloves. He doesn't realize they've passed the border into Texas until John tells him.

"What?" Gale says.

"Yeah." John yawns into his hand. "Should probably find a place to stay for the night, unless you want to sleep in the car."

"Can you afford that?"

"You're paying me back, remember?"

Gale doesn't call John out on his non-answer. He's exhausted and wants to sleep in a bed. They can find a bus station tomorrow and use their tickets to catch a new bus into San Antonio. Neither of them has had dinner, but Gale isn't all that hungry, and John hasn't mentioned eating either. Another ten minutes passes of them driving before they find a motel advertising vacancies. Gale pulls over and parks.

Under the streetlights and out of the car, Gale notices that there's leaves stuck to his skirt and mud on his heels and that's not all.

"*Shit*," he says.

John freezes. "What?"

"I've got a run in my stockings, John."

John rounds the car and takes in the run in Gale's left stocking. He whistles. The run is bad, and it'll only get worse.

"Better not flash your legs," he says.

Gale ignores him and picks the leaves from his skirt. He lingers in the corner of the lobby while John talks to the motel owner and gets them a room. The owner, a middle-aged man with a willowy figure, offers them a single room. John clears his throat.

"Have you, uh, got any double rooms? I snore like the devil and my wife hates it," he says.

"No, sorry," the man says. "Just the single."

John glances back at Gale, arm still wrapped around his middle. Gale nods quickly.

"Okay, we'll take it," John says. "Do you have a pajama rental?"

"For you or your wife?"

"Me," John says.

He takes the key and winks at Gale. He won't let Gale carry his suitcase though, despite how clear it is that his ribs are hurting him. They're three doors down from the motel lobby, not a long walk, but still a walk, made all the more slow by John.

"Bucky, just let me help," Gale says.

"No. If anyone saw us right now, they'd think I'm some kind of yuck, having my wife carry my suitcase."

Gale yanks the suitcase out of his hand.

"So tonight you're a yuck," he says, and walks ahead.

They get into the room and John immediately sits on the bed. He shrugs his coat off gingerly, suit jacket, wriggles out of his tie and unbuttons his shirt. Uses his left hand to slide his suspenders down so he can slip his shirt off his shoulders. There's an ugly red mark on his right ribs. Gale walks to him without thinking and goes to his knees. He takes his gloves off and presses a hand gently over the growing bruise. Feels John tense up.

"Breathe in and out," he says.

John does. His breathing is beautiful and normal, if a little pained.

"Your lungs sound fine," Gale says. "Probably just bruised."

John's voice is a rumble above him, vibrates against Gale's hand.

"You know about bruised ribs?"

Gale nods. Knows what else that's revealing. He can't stop looking at John's ribs, the whole of him. He's alive. Gale had been terrified to lose him back in Oklahoma. He's terrified still, because he wants John here with him now, and after this. Gale wants to do more than look. John's hand covers his own.

"It's okay, Buck," he says. "You're okay. Look at me. I'm okay."

Gale can't look at John right now. He knows himself well enough to know he won't do anything, but he's afraid of what John will see. He pulls his hand back and tries to collect himself. As he stands, he hears his stocking rip further. There's a little hole in the shin now, blond hair poking through.

"Goddammit," Gale says.

"We can get you new ones tomorrow." John is rubbing at his ribs, shirt pooled at his waist. He's got dark hair scattered over his chest and dusky nipples. John wears a crucifix on his neck, nestled next to a pendant Gale doesn't recognize. He's never been religious. "In the

meantime, you got a perfectly functional razor."

They both stare at Gale's legs. It's such a ludicrous suggestion. This whole trip has been ludicrous, Gale's entire life has been a series of events that shouldn't have happened. This still feels like a step too far. Gale snorts.

"I'm not doing that, Bucky."

"Aw, you're no fun, Buck. And after you almost got me killed today." John's face pinches. "I didn't mean it like that, shit—I was joking—"

"Forget it, it's fine," Gale says.

He knows it was a joke, but it still stings rotten and forces him to think about the gun in John's face all over again. Gale pulls off his heels. There's mud and prairie grass stuck to them. Somehow, Gale expected blood. John shifts on the bed.

"Buck—"

"See about some ice for your ribs, would you?" Gale heads for the bathroom. "And the pajama rental."

He shuts the bathroom door before John's, "Yes, dear," can get through clearly. Undresses, showers, and stares at his legs under the running water. Gale has wiry tufts of hair all over his shins and up to his knees that tapers off some on his thighs, then thickens again towards his crotch. He's hairy, likes being hairy, but wonders now what that would feel like. His legs smooth. The hair would grow back, probably in a week or less, he reckons. A very temporary fix until he gets new stockings.

Gale gets out of the shower, then wraps a towel around his waist and fills the tub with water. He's never seen a woman shave her legs before, but he knows it's an upward motion. It should be like shaving his face, or he hopes it will be. He pulls out the shaving kit from his purse and sets the contents on the sink. There are red lines around his chest and waist from the brassiere and girdle. Something about this feels strangely deviant, like Gale is sneaking out on a school night to go for a joy ride. He shouldn't be giddy at the idea of shaving his legs.

He opens the bathroom door, hand holding the knot of his towel. John is on the bed icing his ribs like Gale told him to, dressed only in his trousers, suspenders hanging loose around his thighs.

"John," Gale says. "I need the strop."

John stands from the bed. The ice drops to the floor with a crunch and unwraps from the cloth, cubes already half-melted. His skin is pinkish from where the ice has been. John grabs the leather strop from his suitcase and edges his way into the bathroom. Gale hooks it onto the towel rack by the sink.

"You're seriously going to shave your legs?" John says. "You don't have to."

"John, I don't tend to do things I don't want to do."

Gale thinks that's true. He's not doing this for John, or if he is, it's only secondary.

"Trust me, I've noticed," John says, and smiles at Gale's reflection in the mirror.

Gale flicks open his straight razor. There's a thin line of blood dried on the edge of the blade. Gale doesn't remember drawing any blood earlier. He could've sworn he hadn't. He keeps staring, trying to pull the memory back, but there's only the feeling of Bill's pulse under his hand and John on the ground. The gun.

John takes the razor from his hand and clasps it shut.

"Use mine," he says. "I'm a straight razor man, too."

He leaves and comes back a minute later with his own razor and a stool that he sets down next to the tub and sits on.

"What are you doing?" Gale asks.

"Helping." John pats the lip of the tub. "Come on, I got two sisters, remember? I've seen them do it loads of times."

He makes it sound easy, like it's no big deal, as if Gale isn't standing in front of him in nothing but a towel while John offers to shave his legs. Gale can't tell if it should be a big deal or not. He wants to sit and knows he shouldn't. Even if all John is offering is his help, they're supposed to be acting like a husband and wife, at least in public. Maybe not behind closed doors. They didn't really discuss that. Maybe this is something husbands do for their wives. Gale's brain is full of static.

He sits on the lip of the tub.

John grabs hold of Gale's ankle and pulls his foot closer until it rests between his spread legs, nearly brushing his crotch. He starts lathering shaving cream all over Gale's leg using the shaving brush. Gale remembers he's in only a towel and tugs the cotton down, hand covering the gap. He feels like a prude.

"Only up to my knees," he says.

John nods and flicks open the razor.

The first pass of the blade goes from ankle to halfway up his shin and Gale can't help himself, he trembles. John pauses with the razor pressed against his skin, his hand holding the back of Gale's calf.

"You gotta hold still, Buck," he says. "I don't wanna nick ya."

His voice is deeper somehow. Thick. Gale has no response to give him, throat clogged. John rinses off the razor in the tub water and goes for a second pass up Gale's leg. It's not like shaving his face. Gale doesn't know if that's because his legs are sensitive or because it's someone else shaving him, *John* shaving him. He has to fight himself not to tremble again, toes curling in. And John is so careful. He glides over Gale's calf, hands covered in shaving cream, his touch light despite the amount of hair on Gale's legs, blond but thick.

He has Gale bend his knee when he needs to shave that area, razor edging over all the little bumps and crevices of Gale's bony knee.

"You're good at this," Gale says, struck with the need to praise him.

John looks up, preening, face a bit flush in the humid air of the bathroom before he returns to his task.

"Told you—two sisters."

"Lucy and Louise?"

John rinses the razor off again in the tub, the water swirled with hair and shaving cream now.

"Did I tell you their names?" he asks.

"No," Gale says, a little embarrassed to admit the truth but feeling that he owes John this and more. "I overheard you the first morning on the phone. Didn't mean to."

"Oh," says John, and bites his lip.

"I bet your mom will come around. I'm sure she's proud of you, John."

John takes hold of Gale's ankle and straightens his leg out again to shave behind his knee. Gale's foot rests on his thigh. Gale can see John doing this for his wife. He can see John married, easily, to a woman who makes him laugh and won't get him into trouble. Gale feels like the proxy, the stand-in. He worries this is as close as he will get to normal.

John shaves along the tender skin behind his knee and Gale forgets himself and shivers. John smiles.

"She will be proud of me," he says. "I'm going to be an officer, come back to her as more than I left."

Gale doesn't push him. He can't imagine John's mother isn't already proud. He's not sure it's his place to say that. John squeezes his calf and asks for his other leg. He shaves the left with the same amount of concentration and care as the right, hands squeezing Gale's calf or thigh to hold him in place. By the time he finishes, Gale's dick is half-hard, choked against his thigh by his own hand. It's a relief when John splashes cold water from the sink on his legs to rinse them.

"How's it feel?" he asks.

Gale pets his free hand down his leg. He's smooth. Skin shiny. He's not sure how it feels other than bizarre, and that's what he says.

"Bizarre?" John says.

"Different," Gale clarifies. "I don't think I mind it."

He really doesn't. He thinks he doesn't mind mostly because it was John who did it, and especially doesn't mind John's satisfied smile at his words. John's smile cuts a little deeper. Roguish.

"Let me do your pits," he says.

Gale's cock twitches against his thigh. He should say no. He wants to say yes, not because he's particularly keen to have his underarms shaven, but because he wants John to touch him for a little while longer and this is how he gets that.

He lifts his arm and lets his elbow go lax behind his head, neck tilting

so he can look at the tawny hair there. He can smell a bit of soap from the shower clinging to his skin. There's no reason for them to do this, other than to keep playing out whatever it is they're doing. Gale realizes that feels like enough. He's willing to go through with this if that's what John wants. He'll make peace later with whatever that means about him.

"Okay," he says.

"Really?" John says.

But he's already grabbing the brush to work up more shaving lather. Gale nods and keeps his elbow tucked behind his head, breath picking up when John covers his underarm in shaving cream. He feels sensitive and isn't sure if that's from anticipation or he simply never noticed how tender the skin here was before. As John passes the razor over him, Gale bites his lip. It doesn't quite tickle, but it's something. He can feel John's breath against his arm. His breathing isn't steady.

It's four passes before Gale's underarm is free of hair, then John has him switch arms. Gale feels nude, totally and completely, exposed, every puff of John's breath against him brings goosebumps to the surface of his skin. The shaving lasts too long and not long enough. John wets a washcloth with cold water and presses the cotton against Gale's underarms. Even the shock of that doesn't help Gale feel less turned on.

"How's that feel?" John asks. "Still bizarre?"

He's still leaning in close on the stool. It must hurt his ribs, but he doesn't move back. He feels too close. This feels too intimate and Gale doesn't know why. He lifts his right arm up like before and looks at the newly bared skin of his underarm. Touches two fingertips to himself.

"Just feels soft," he says.

Which is the truth. He feels soft, and he's not, he's simply presenting the illusion. Gale hears John swallow.

"Can I feel?" he asks.

Gale meets his eyes. John *is* close, enough that Gale can see himself reflected in his pupils, which makes it easier to nod. He's already dizzy when John pulls back and grabs his ankle, lifts his leg to his lap and sweeps a broad palm over his knee and shin. Gale watches, struck

dumb at the bulge in John's trousers. He's hard. From this, from shaving Gale, and Gale could arch his foot and touch the outline of John's erection. He thinks about doing just that, only John sets his leg down again and strokes his fingers along Gale's armpit.

Gale inhales sharply, held in place by John's grip on his elbow and his own horrible desire. John leans a little closer, the stool creaking, and inhales.

"You smell like me, Buck," he says.

And he's right. Gale smells like his shaving cream. John shaved him with his own razor. Gale presses his palm against his cock and knows the move is obvious and doesn't think he cares anymore.

"You do feel soft," John says. "Is it okay if I—"

He doesn't finish. His lips press to Gale's armpit. Not quite a kiss, just touching, and Gale moans anyway, then bites it back. Reduced to panting when the tip of John's tongue teases against his shaven skin once, twice. This is crazy, Gale knows it's crazy, and he can't stop. Can't tell John to stop. He rubs his palm against his cock, John's name tucked in his teeth.

There are two heavy knocks on the motel room door.

Gale shoots upright and turns his body to the wall of the bathroom, the reality of where they are and what happened hitting him so hard he's nauseated. He presses his forehead against the wall.

"Mr. Egan?" It's the motel owner. "Sorry it took so long, but I've got your pajama rental."

"Oh." Gale hears John stand up, clear his throat. "Just a moment."

The bathroom door shuts behind John. Gale still doesn't move for another five minutes. It seems to take that long for his body to calm down, for him to stop clenching his fists. He shouldn't have let that happen, not any of it. There's silence for a long time in the room. Gale wonders what John is doing, what he's thinking. Gale doesn't think he can handle talking about this. He wants there to be nothing to talk about.

Gale is halfway convinced that John has left when he knocks softly on the bathroom door.

"Buck," he says. "I'm gonna leave your pajamas right here outside the door."

Gale lifts his forehead from the wall and waits a moment before cracking the door open and grabbing the pajamas. His first set of men's clothes in days. He slips them on. The bottoms feel strange against his legs, the top as well when he lets his arms go lax. He feels so aware of himself, his skin and his body. Of what he let John do to him moments ago. Feminize him. Gale *let* him.

He finally leaves the bathroom. John is on the bed in his own pajamas, back to Gale, but Gale can see the whiskey bottle in his hand. He has to keep moving, walk to that bed and sleep beside John tonight.

John turns as Gale's footsteps get closer, throat working around a last sip of whiskey before he screws the cap back on.

"Hey," he says. "Having a little nightcap for my ribs."

"You don't have to stop," Gale tells him.

He's not sure if John is actually drinking to dull the pain in his ribs or because he wants to forget what happened a few minutes ago in the bathroom. Pretending that Gale was a woman. John shakes his head and tucks the bottle away.

"I've had enough." He gives Gale an earnest look and Gale's body swoops with anxiety. "Listen, are you—in the bathroom—"

"I'm exhausted," Gale says.

He throws the covers back and gets into bed. They can move past this. Another two days or so and they should be in San Antonio and can forget all about whatever temporary psychosis came over them. The adrenaline from Bill attacking John, whatever precipitated the whole night. Gale needs him to just get in the bed and drop this. He knows from experience that it's better not to try and talk about these things.

Gale stares at the ceiling and feels as John finally gets under the covers and settles into bed. His body seems close and warm despite the distance he's keeping.

"Yeah," John says, his voice somehow far away sounding. "Exciting night. Don't think I ever want to go back to Oklahoma again."

Gale hates himself for smiling. He reaches over and switches off the lamp.

"Neither do I," he says.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> "You will fly," John says. "My god, Buck, you fly anything like you drive, you could probably win the war single-handed."
>
> "That joke is getting stale, Bucky."
>
> "No, no, I think I can get a few more miles from it, sweetheart."
>
> Gale presses his lips together to stop from smiling.
>
> "I'm sure you can, honey," he says.

Chapter Notes

> i realized there are actually *two* iconic scenes from *it happened one night* in this chapter. please enjoy and thank you for reading. and thank you to @steeseman again for the beta...my heinous typos... ♥

They have a coffee shop breakfast in the morning and Gale gives John money from his purse to buy him a new pair of stockings at the shop across the street. John stares at the dollar Gale has given him.

"What do I ask for?" he says.

"What do you mean? Ask for stockings."

"Don't they come in different sizes?"

Gale sips at the dregs of his coffee. He doesn't actually know. Marge didn't tell him.

"Tall ones," Gale says. "Big, I suppose."

John gives him a slow, amused blink as he shifts out of the booth and grabs his coat. He's still moving tenderly from his ribs, but they're not as bruised as Gale thought they might have been.

"Alright, I'll ask for big, tall stockings for my big, tall wife," John says, then grabs a toothpick from the dispenser on the table and hands it to Gale. "For your collection," he says.

Gale folds the toothpick in his hand, John's fingers brushing over his bare palm. This is the first time they've touched since last night.

"Thank you," he says. "I'll wait in the car."

"Jesus, Gale, let me drive today, I'm begging you."

Gale rolls his eyes.

"I'll think about it."

They act like nothing happened last night. Gale was surprised to find John had woken up first that morning, had cleaned and stropped Gale's razor for him, the blade shiny as if there had never been any blood there in the first place. He yapped at Gale while he shaved his face and said he was starving, dreamt about food all night. Gale watched John move around the room in the mirror as he got dressed, then shut the door and tucked himself into his girdle, which somehow made it easier and more difficult to breathe. Gale drove them to breakfast and John kept his eyes closed half the ride.

And now here they are. The only proof something strange happened is Gale's bare legs and underarms.

He waits in the car until John shows up at the driver's side with a silly little pink bag holding his new stockings. Gale rolls down the window and John gives him an awful but endearing pout.

"Alright," Gale says. "You can drive, stop griping."

He takes the bag and gets into the passenger seat to examine the stockings. They seem like the same color as before, same size and everything, though Gale honestly doesn't know how to tell the difference. John tells him stockings are actually sized by height and shoe size, so he told the woman at the shop his wife had huge feet.

"Thanks," Gale says, weirdly offended. "Drive a bit out of town, would you? I can't put these on in the car."

"Sure thing, sweetheart," John says.

Gale bites the inside of his cheek. He supposes it would be stranger if John suddenly stopped with the little endearments, rather than continue them. It would mean something really has changed.

John gasses up the Buick, then drives them out of town and pulls over

on the side of the road. He sticks his nose in a road map while Gale pops open the passenger door to roll up his new stockings. The moment the silk passes over his bare ankle, Gale's skin prickles. His cock, tucked and trapped in the girdle, twitches uselessly. Christ, he didn't know it was going to feel this different because his legs are shaved. Gale drags the stocking up his calf and bites at his lip, stuck in the sense memory of John's hand petting up his leg last night.

"You good?" John asks.

"Yup," Gale says.

He finishes the first and rolls the other stocking up fast, gets his heels on, and stands to hook the keyholes. The second Gale gets back in the car he digs through his purse and slots a toothpick between his teeth. John is folding the map.

"The motel owner said we were close to Amarillo, but there's not much there. We need to get to Lubbock to get the bus."

"In the car," Gale says, toothpick shifting right to left.

They're speaking around the issue, sentences trailing off. There's no way of knowing whether Bill is alive or dead. If he's alive, he's likely reported the car stolen. Gale has no interest in being arrested. He knows John doesn't either, but they need to get to San Antonio. And there's no surety that Bill *is* alive. They have no way of being sure of anything.

"We should just drive," Gale says. "We won't get anywhere sitting here, and at the speed you drive, who knows how long it'll take us to get to Lubbock."

John says, "Ha!" and sets the map between them. "I drive like a normal human being, Buck. You drive like a maniac."

That seems to have settled things, though. John puts the car in drive and pulls back onto the road, the two of them heading south. Gale is grateful to be off the bus for a while longer. He can sit with his legs open, douse a toothpick in his spit, take his gloves off and poke fun at John's driving. John doesn't believe him when Gale says he's never been in an accident or been pulled over.

"Probably nothing out there in Wyoming to hit, anyway."

Gale huffs, smiling, and examines his toothpick. There's traces of red

from his lipstick on the wood, a roll of color Gale is nearly used to. He places the toothpick back in his mouth and watches the landscape whip by. The silence that falls between him and John is easy, comfortable silence. Gale doesn't feel the need to fill the gaps and John doesn't offer any words for a long while, focused mostly on the road.

High Plains Texas is a lot of big, open landscape. Gale can see the rise of canyons in the distance, felted with snow. He's never been to so many states in his life, never seen so much of America before. He's seeing it with John. Gale feels like he's known him for months. Years. Not days. Gale feels as if they've driven this highway already.

Another half hour or so passes in easy silence before John talks again.

"So, you know what kind of pilot you want to be?"

"A good one," Gale says.

"Of course you'll be a good pilot. I meant what kind of bird do you want to fly?"

John says *of course* with such conviction that Gale believes him immediately. It's hard not to. He replaces his old toothpick with a fresh one and shrugs.

"I like the P-40 Warhawk," he says. "Solid, reliable, a tough bird."

John whistles. "You want to be a fighter pilot, huh? Makes sense. You're definitely a fighter."

"Don't you?" Gale asks.

"Thought I did, but then I saw *Test Pilot,* and I tell you, that got me hot for the heavy bombers." John holds his hand palm down to the dashboard and sweeps it across like he's flying over the horizon. "I don't think there'd be a better feeling than being in a Flying Fortress."

Gale considers that. Mostly, he thinks about John going to the pictures and watching Clark Gable, and of course it was Clark Gable, flying a B-17 prototype, his eyes black diamonds. The thrill going through him. Gale understands.

"I just want to fly."

"You will fly," John says. "My god, Buck, you fly anything like you

drive, you could probably win the war single-handed."

"That joke is getting stale, Bucky."

"No, no, I think I can get a few more miles from it, sweetheart."

Gale presses his lips together to stop from smiling.

"I'm sure you can, honey," he says.

"I will, doll."

When Gale glances over, John's eyes are creases, his tongue poking out between his teeth. Gale rolls his toothpick over his tongue and lets the pointed edge stab him to the sweet edge of pain. He wonders how much farther it is to Lubbock. If he should risk calling Marge, and if once he and John get to San Antonio, all of this will feel like a strange dream.

"You ever think about getting married?" John asks.

Gale bites down on his toothpick accidentally and swallows a curse. There's too much to say about that, and really nothing at all. He gives the answer every young man should give.

"Sure."

John nods. "To Marge?"

"She's just a friend."

They were sweethearts, briefly, during high school, and kissed once after getting ice cream together. Gale couldn't tell who was more uncomfortable, him or Marge. Nothing about the kiss felt right, didn't feel particularly wrong, either. It all just felt...flat. Uninteresting. They stayed friends. Gale went off to college. The next time he kissed someone was a boy in his fraternity in the dorms during a late-night study session. A boy named Thomas he'd looked at too many times in passing. Thomas had severe green eyes and dark hair and, like, Gale, was shy.

And it was Thomas who kissed Gale first in his dorm, fingers warm, a little clammy. They brought each other off with their hands and not a word passed between them, except, Gale thought, the understanding of who they both were.

The next day, Thomas went around saying how drunk he'd been the

night before, how he didn't remember a thing, when Gale knew he hadn't had any alcohol at all. He didn't mention Gale's name but Gale felt humiliated and horrified anyway, some secret, shameful part of him on display. He hadn't been brave enough to know about himself that way until Thomas kissed him. In the moment, Gale was sure they had shared something with each other. Now, he felt like a degenerate. A perversion. The one time Gale tried talking to Thomas, he avoided him like Gale had some kind of sickness he was afraid to catch.

Thomas never spoke to Gale again. Got married to a girl in a sorority during their third year. Gale went to the wedding, of course.

"Alright, not Marge. But you want to get married?" John asks.

"I guess." Gale stares at the long line of road passing under the car. "Do you?"

"One day, maybe. I don't think I'm ready to settle down yet."

Gale doesn't want to press. Shouldn't press. His finger rubs along his stocking. All this a little cut on the roof of his mouth he can't stop tonguing back open.

"No girl back in Manitowoc?"

"More like too many girls," John says. "Half of them probably don't even want to talk to me anymore."

He inhales sharply through his teeth. Goes silent. Gale wonders what he's remembering, or regretting, and he could be doing neither of those things, just driving the flat blacktop and not overthinking the way Gale always seems to. The sunlight is making the interior of the car glow. John is glowing.

"Nah, not time settle down with a girl. I'm still Mrs. Egan's Bad Boy John back home, ya know," John says. "Can't let that go right away."

He turns from watching the road and gives Gale a stupid, somehow still charming smile. Gale stares back flatly. He can't tell whether John is being serious or not. He hates that John saying he's not ready to settle down has kindled some kind of false hope in Gale, as if that means or matters anything for him.

"Just pay attention to the road, John."

They manage to keep the conversation away from any other topics

surrounding marriage until they enter Lubbock and find the bus station downtown. Gale waits in the car while John checks with the station manager. Watches the shape of John's figure as he moves around, easy and friendly. He kissed Gale last night, sort of. Touched Gale, anyway, in a manner that wasn't strictly friendly. And he's still talking about San Antonio, about flying, as if he doesn't think Gale is strange or perverted.

John walks back to the car with his hands pinned to his hips, lips tugged into a frown.

"Bad news," he says. "There's not another bus out to San Antonio until tomorrow."

Gale swallows, the guilt making him sweaty.

"Shit. When do you have to report to base?"

"I've got three more days," John says. "Padded for time so I could see the city first."

He opens the map and draws his finger down, tracing the highways and city lines.

"We could stay here or keep driving and see how far we get. Sleep in the car tonight."

"The stolen car," Gale says, like maybe John forgot.

"It's not stolen if it hasn't been reported," John says.

We don't know that, Gale thinks. He doesn't want to stay in the car. But it's cheaper to get gas and drive than it is to get a room for the night, and Gale only has about two dollars left on him.

"How far do you think we can get?"

"No idea, maybe San Angelo." John looks up from the map. "What do you say, Buck?"

And he means it, asking Gale. He wants his opinion, and Gale is both thrilled and scared that John would listen to him if Gale said they should stay here. But the more he thinks about it, the more he wants to keep going, keep driving. Stopping feels worse. The stagnation. Like they're daring someone to catch up with them. Gale breathes through his nose, steady.

"Let's drive," he says.

They stop twice on the side of the highway to pee, once for gas, once for Gale to shave his stubble using river water, but otherwise drive into the evening. No one pulls them over, which gives Gale an eerie sense of invincibility. Maybe Bill didn't report the car. Maybe he's dead. Maybe they decided Gale was too much trouble and decided not to keep coming after him. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Something is gnawing at the back of his head.

When they finally do stop for the night, they're not in San Angelo, but some town that's tiny in a way Gale thinks of western towns, like Cheyenne. Sleepy, men walking around in cowboy hats, though the air is warmer here by far, slightly chilled now that it's near dark. John pulls into a filling station to get more gas and some sandwiches inside for them both. He asks the attendant to fill the car up halfway. If they're up early enough tomorrow, they should be able to get to another town and catch the bus for San Antonio.

Gale waits until John is inside, then steps out of the car and into the phone booth by the picnic tables.

It's an expensive call, but Gale makes it anyway. The operator connects him to Casper, and the line rings twice before Marge's mother picks up, asking who the hell is calling them from Texas. Gale holds his breath. He hears Marge in the background, shuffling before her voice is clear over the line.

"Gale?"

"It's me," Gale says. "Have you heard anything?"

"I've heard too many things," Marge says. "Apparently you and your sister attacked Bill Fennick in Oklahoma."

Gale trips over his words a few times. Bill thought—he saw Gale and really thought—

"My *sister*?"

"That was my reaction. I assume that was you. There was supposedly some other man there as well?"

Gale doesn't know if he's relieved or disappointed that Bill is alive. Relieved, he thinks. Because that means John wasn't part of anything wrong. His hands are clean.

"Something like that. But my sister hasn't left Montana."

"So that was definitely you, then. And who's this other man?" Marge asks.

Gale glances out of the phone booth. The gas attendant is finishing with the car and watching Gale. Smiling. Gale looks away.

"I met him in Ft. Collins. He's—I trust him. He's helping me."

"That's good," Marge says. "And surprising. I don't know you to trust easily. Gale, listen, Bill reported the car stolen. You don't have it, do you?"

"No." Gale clutches the receiver harder. "No, we dumped the car."

There's silence over the line. They don't have much time left on the call and Gale doesn't want to lie, but he won't worry Marge, either. He thinks about his mother hearing all this. She must be sick with worry. Gale hates that he can't call her. He wants to tell her that he's alright. He wants to tell her to leave his father.

At the same time, Gale wonders how much his mother knows. How much has his mother seen and done nothing about, all Gale's life? Why did she never leave his father?

"Gale," Marge says. "Esther was seen hollering at her father outside the supermarket. I don't know why or what's going on. Can I...do you need me to wire you some money? I can get to a—"

"No, Marge, Jesus. I'm safe. And you'll be safe because you don't know where I'm going."

He wonders if Esther is sore because her fiancé ran away. Maybe she doesn't want Gale anymore, now that she thinks he's a coward. There's no way Bill is already back in Casper. He's either on his way to Texas or hoping the police pick him and John up. Gale hears Marge kiss her tongue against her teeth over the phone.

"You are just as stubborn as always," she says. "I can take care of myself, you know. Will you at least tell me the name of this man you're with?"

Gale rolls his tongue in his mouth a moment.

"Bucky," he says.

"What the hell kind of name is—"

Gale ends the call.

He steps out of the phone booth and back to the car. The attendant walks from behind the gas pump so seamlessly that Gale almost startles and punches him. He's got striped coveralls on and smells like gasoline, blond hair streaked black from working around grease all day. Gale nods to him and goes for the passenger door. The attendant blocks him.

"That your husband you're driving with, honey?" he asks.

Gale stares at him. It takes a moment too long for Gale to realize exactly what he's implying. The attendant leans on the hood of the Buick and smiles. He's looking at Gale's chest, not his face.

"What's the matter, he don't let you speak? I'd love to hear you talk, tall dame like you, bet you got a lot to say."

"I don't," Gale says, driving his voice as high as he can, actually startled now.

"Okay," the attendant says. "You play hard to get, I can work with that. You know, I get off in an hour, if you want to dump that loser you're with and have a good time."

"She'll be busy in an hour," John says.

Gale turns at the same time as the attendant. John stands there with two sandwiches and two soda bottles tucked under his arms, face tight, his smile no longer crooked and friendly. He's straight, serious, coiled up.

"I think my wife and I will be busy all night, actually," John says.

"Shit." The attendant rips his arm off the hood of the car. "Shit, I thought you two were just riding together, pal. Didn't realize you owned the lady."

"What did you say?"

The man shrinks. Gale wants to hit him, and knows, under the

circumstances, he shouldn't. In fact, he can't.

John pulls the driver's side door open to dump their food in. He doesn't take his eyes off the attendant. Gale takes his cue to brush past the man and get in the passenger side and slam the door shut. His honor defended. Jesus. John watches the attendant until he's back inside the station before he gets in the car.

"Jesus," John says.

He rips his hat off and throws it on the dashboard. He starts the car and rips out of the station faster than Gale has ever seen him drive.

"Jesus," John says again. "The nerve of that prick. Talking to you like that. *About* you like that."

Gale sits there, poleaxed. He's not sure he knows what just happened. He would never in his life talk to a woman that way. Has seen it happen, but never experienced it, never thought he would. John swerves on a corner. One of the soda bottles rolls into Gale's thigh.

"Bullshit he didn't know we were married," John says. "Who else would you be besides my wife?"

"Alright, drop it," Gale says.

"What do you mean, drop it? He was waiting to pounce on you, like you have no say in the matter, like we aren't—"

"We're not!" Gale barks the words out, snaps his tone down and exhales shakily. "Bucky, we're not married."

John slows to a stop at the intersection. Gale feels like he can't breathe properly. John is so worked up, he wants to send him out of the car to run it off, hit something, come back calm and rational. Gale doesn't feel rational at all right now. He takes a deep breath and rubs his hand along the edge of where the girdle cuts into his ribs.

"I know we're not," John finally says. "But he thought we were. And I'm supposed to be helping you, Buck."

"You are helping me, Bucky."

John's face looks sallow and off under the streetlights. Gale isn't sure what he's thinking right now, and doesn't get to ask before a car honks behind them. They haven't moved through the intersection yet. John

huffs and keeps driving.

"Helping you by making you sleep in a car tonight," he says.

Gale licks over his teeth and says, "It's been reported stolen, by the way."

John slams on the brakes. The car behind them honks again.

"It's been *what*—"

"Keep driving," Gale says. "You're going to get us into an accident."

John apologizes and keeps on. Before Gale can explain anything, a siren whoops behind them, a flash of lights. They're being pulled over. Gale looks in the side mirror and sees a motorcycle cop riding up behind them. Even with the helmet on, Gale can see he's young. John pulls the car over to the side on a corner, the two of them lit up red and blue.

"Oh shit," he says. "Oh shit, shit, shit."

Gale feels strangely calm. Completely devoid of panic, of any feeling at all. His only thought is how to get them both out of this. He digs the heels of his palms into his eyes and rubs hard, then takes his gloves off and dabs his fingers along the sweating soda bottle next to his thigh and so he can tap the condensation around his eyes and cheeks.

"Follow my lead," he says. "Just play along, okay?"

He pulls his gloves back on as the cop walks up to John's window and taps the glass with two knuckles. John rolls the window down three-quarters of the way. Gale takes a breath. The dry Texas air seeps into the car, the cop says, "Evening, sir, can I see your—"

"And now look what you've done!" Gale wails. "You got pulled over! You never do anything right!"

John doesn't even hesitate.

"Oh Jesus, quit your whining," he yells back. "I could bring you a mountain of gold and I still wouldn't do anything right!"

"I'd like to see you find a single nugget of gold!"

The cop clears his throat. Gale glances at him, briefly. He's even

younger up close. He's absolutely bewildered at their display, bent awkwardly to peer through the window. Gale sniffs and looks away even though he's not actually crying.

"Sir," the cop says. "I really need to see your license—"

"I'm sorry, officer," John says. "I'm so sorry, she's just hysterical. She was slapping me a minute ago! That's why I kept braking like that."

"I'm *hysterical*!" Gale covers his eyes with his hands. "That awful man at the filling station pinched my rear and you did nothing!"

"Hold on now. The filling station?"

That's the cop again. Gale drops his hands from his eyes. The cop is frowning. His badge looks spit-shined. A good, small-town boy who believes in proper manners and won't stand for women being treated so callously. Was probably raised in this town. There's a good chance he'll die here as well.

"Yes," Gale says. "Just on the corner there. Oh, it was terrible. He was terrible and awful!"

"Stop it!" John yells. "Stop it, you're getting her hysterical again!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't—" The cop folds his hands over the window like he's going to reach in and comfort Gale. "Calm down, miss, it's alright. I bet that was Terry. He's a bit of a self-proclaimed Romeo. I'll go over there and give him a talkin' to right this minute."

Gale nods and dabs at his eyes with his gloved fingers. He should really have a handkerchief for this. His throat hurts from making his voice so shrill. He slaps John's shoulder with the back of hand.

"See," he says. "This nice officer is going to talk to that horrid man, which is more than you did and I'm your wife!"

"Ah, shut up, you're never happy." John turns to the cop. "She's never happy! Just crying all the damn time."

"I don't cry all the time," Gale says, then throws his arms onto the dashboard, collapses into them, and pretends to sob.

He hasn't cried in so long that Gale can't even remember the date. Before college, maybe even before high school. And he's not really crying, but the sound is strange in his ears, despite being pretend.

Almost worse than actually crying. Over his fake hysterics, he hears the cop clear his throat and say he's going over to the filling station now.

"Maybe...maybe take your wife for some air," he says.

"Sure thing," says John. "Thank you, officer. I'm awful sorry for the trouble."

Gale hears the cop walk away, but he waits until the chug of his motorcycle fades before he lifts his head off the dashboard. He's gone. John rolls the window back up, then stares at Gale like he doesn't believe what just happened. Laughter spits out of Gale's mouth. He has to lay his head back on the dashboard. John laughs right along with him, loud, straight from his belly. It hurts to laugh this hard and Gale can't stop himself. He wraps his arms around his stomach and rides out the laughter, realizes that it's partly relief making him laugh this much. And partly that he's simply happy.

"Jesus." John wipes a tear from the corner of his eye. "That cop couldn't get out of here fast enough. How'd you think to do that?"

"Fighting makes people uncomfortable," Gale says. "And he's a small-town cop. He wants to be the hero."

John whistles. "Brains *and* beauty, huh?"

Gale snorts. John had been seamless. Gale still can't believe how well they pulled that off, makes him feel again like he's known John for longer than just a few days. Gives him that horrible sense of hope.

"Just drive, would you?" he says. "Before he comes back."

John salutes and pulls off into the night again.

They pull over into a park and eat their dinner sitting on top of a picnic table. Gale finally explains the phone call with Marge. He had to check in, because it was all feeling too easy, and turns out it was. The Buick is a new model, the license plate is known. They have to lose the car. John combs his hand through his hair. That one curl falls onto his forehead again. Gale realizes that he's going to hate to see it go when John has to cut his hair for Army regulations.

"Alright, well we need to sleep somewhere tonight," John says. "Car is the only option. Doubt that cop will find us if we go out of the town some. Tomorrow morning we can dump it and see about hitching a

ride."

That's Gale's thought as well. He doesn't voice that. Watches instead as John drains his soda, neck bobbing under the park lights.

They brush their teeth in the public bathroom, and drive to the outskirts of town, where it's mostly farmland, to sleep for the night. The sky is so clear Gale thinks he can see every star there is to see, all of them pinned to the canvas of the night for him. He stares, struck with the urge to ask John if he wouldn't rather sleep outside under the stars and knows that's foolish to suggest. The night isn't freezing, but still chilly. And it's better they sleep separate.

There's one blanket in the trunk that John insists Gale use, since he can't change into pajamas. John can at least cover himself with his robe. Gale stretches out in the backseat, shoes kicked off, and risks taking the hat and wig off as well. John stays up front and leans over the seat, watches as Gale settles in.

"What about your ribs?" Gale asks.

"I'm okay. Got some aspirin at the station, but I'm honestly not feeling it too much today."

Gale pulls the blanket up to his chin and grins. "So you were just being a baby last night."

"Ow, you're really tugging my leash today, Buck."

John drops back down from view. Gale hears him shift around on the front seats to try and get comfortable. He's already taller and broader than Gale is, and Gale is feeling pretty cramped. John must be having a go of it. He settles after a while, sighs into the car interior.

"Sorry I got all worked up back there before," John says. "Guy shouldn't have been saying all that, is all. No matter who he thinks you are."

His words would soften Gale right up if he needed to be. Truthfully, Gale has already forgiven John for the whole thing.

"I won't tell anyone back in Manitowoc you're so chivalrous," he says. "You can still be Bad Boy John."

"Oh my god, Buck. Say that again, would you?"

"Go to sleep, you idiot."

"I think I'm already asleep," John says.

Gale turns his face into the car seat and hides his blush. Doesn't matter if John can't see. At this point, Gale is hiding the reaction from himself.

John wakes him in the morning. He's leaning over the front seats of the car, sunlight catching on his hair, hand gentle on Gale's arm. Gale is curled up, cheek resting on his open palm. He blinks awake. Resists the urge to nuzzle into the blanket.

"What time is it?"

"Almost ten," John says. "You looked like you needed the sleep."

Gale sits up. He doesn't remember the last time he slept so long. John should've woken him hours ago to get going.

"The bus," Gale says, rubbing at his eyes.

"We're fine. No one has come along the road yet." John holds up a bunch of carrots by their green stems, the smell strong and earthy, dirt still clinging to them. "I got us breakfast, though."

Gale presses his thumb and forefinger between his brows.

"Okay," he says. "Should I ask where those came from?"

"The earth," John tells him, and gets out of the car again.

The two of them are sat on a fence by the side of the road half an hour later, the car dumped, Gale with his face freshly shaved and his wig back on. He crunches into a carrot while John keeps an eye on the road for cars. He's good at hitchhiking, apparently. Used to hitch a lot in high school when he needed to get places.

"All about the face," John says. "I've got a real friendly face, Buck."

Gale takes another bite of his carrot.

"We just need a car," John says.

As if on cue, Gale hears the rumble of an engine. John hops off the fence and heads to the roadside, thumb jutted out. The car drives right past without slowing down. John sputters at the dust that kicks up. Gale spits out a chunk of carrot with too much dirt stuck to the vegetable. He actually doesn't care much for carrots at all.

"Maybe your face wasn't friendly enough," he calls to John.

John waves him off without turning around. A few minutes later, another car drives right by John's thumb. Then another. Then another. John finally turns around and walks back to Gale, scarf trailing loose and pathetic around his shoulders.

"This is a total bust," he says. "I didn't realize Texans hated hitchhikers. How far do you think you can walk in those heels?"

"Not very far," Gale admits.

The shoes aren't even a little comfortable, Gale is astounded that any woman walks in them at all. Then again, he's not *supposed* to be walking in heels. That's the point, isn't it? And Gale isn't going to. If he's going to have to be in this getup for another day or so, Gale might as well get some use out of it other than being ignored or harassed by random men.

Gale hops off the fence and hedges towards the roadside.

He sees a car in the distance making its way towards them on the road. Gale inhales steadily and hikes his skirt up to mid-thigh, then sticks his leg out. The car slams on the brakes just as it's passing, reverses back to Gale. A well-dressed man leans across the seats and rolls down his window by the time John has come over.

"Hello," the man says. "You two need a ride?"

Gale looks at John. Who's looking at Gale's legs. He elbows John's arm. John coughs and nods.

"...Yeah," John says. "Trying to get to San Antonio. Far as you can take us."

"I can probably get you to about Ballinger," the man says. "Hop on in."

John grabs his suitcase and he and Gale climb into the backseat. The man introduces himself as Arthur once he starts driving, arm reached back to shake John's hand, Gale's as well. John thanks him again for the ride.

"I'm John, and this is my wife, Gale."

"Newlyweds?" Arthur asks. "I gotta say, I don't think I would've seen you if your wife hadn't flashed her gams like that, no offense meant."

"*My gams*," Gale mouths to John.

He feels stupid proud of himself for getting a car to stop when John couldn't. Well, he's always been competitive. John purses his lips, mustache bristling.

"None taken," John says. "My wife's got great gams."

John pats Gale's leg, then squeezes briefly before letting go. Gale nearly kicks his leg into Arthur's seat. John's smiling now. Gale settles into the seat and watches the phone lines pass them by. He got them a ride and doesn't have it in him right now to be sour about anything else. Things are finally going okay.

Arthur gets them exactly to Ballinger. He's friendly, doesn't talk too much, and pays for their lunch no matter how many times John insists he doesn't, says it's because they're newlyweds, and ought to save their money for starting a family. John quiets down fast after that. Gale hardly says a thing besides "thank you" and "yes, please" so that he doesn't seem like a mute. He wants to tell Arthur that they're not planning on having children. Make a joke of the whole thing. But Gale doesn't know what John's stance on children is. They can't get into some kind of spat in front of Arthur when they're supposed to already have this figured out. Gale eats and says nothing.

Arthur drops them off in Ballinger in the mid-afternoon so he can continue east. He says, "Be good to each other!" and drives off. Gale almost feels bad for lying to him, but not quite. John watches him turn the corner and says to Gale, "Maybe not all Texans are bad."

"He thinks we're going to have children together, Bucky."

John laughs into his hand.

"He made that assumption on his own."

He drapes an arm over Gale's shoulders as they walk to a little ticket booth, his gait relaxed and easy. Gale doesn't shrug him off. Ballinger is a railway town, so Arthur said, but the bus comes by as well. Most people run onto the train as it slows. Gale lets John ask about the bus schedule and if their earlier tickets are still good for getting to San Antonio.

"Ain't in San Antonio yet, so they're good," the man in the booth says. "The bus comes at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. You'll be there by the afternoon."

"Anywhere we can stay for the night?" John asks.

"Got an inn right up the road. Only place around here to stay, unless you want to go walking out of town."

"Thanks," John says.

Eight in the morning feels far away and yet closer than ever. This time tomorrow, they'll both be in San Antonio, maybe even at the air base. John will be, at least. Gale has to get some decent clothes first and enlist. He's not sure when he'll see John after tomorrow, if they'll be friends in the Army, if they'll fly the same planes. Tonight could be the last night they're really together. The end of something Gale at first wanted desperately to be over and now feels like is closing too fast.

John doesn't seem to be in any hurry to go anywhere. He and Gale amble down the street, his arm still secure around Gale's shoulders. Gale's heels click on the pavement, and that's something he won't miss. There's an endless, howling wind that follows them, tries to lift Gale's skirt and nearly blows John's hat off his head.

The inn is exactly where the booth manager said it would be—a quaint little Spanish-style house tucked away on the road. John rings the bell. An older woman opens the door, rubbing her hands dry on an apron. She's got lines on her face but her hair is still a dark, fresh brown, only traces of gray cutting through. She looks them up and down.

"Got any rooms available?" John asks.

"You're in luck," she says. "One left."

She welcomes them in, shuts the door against the wind, dulling it to a constant moaning. There's dust on Gale and John's shoes. Gale pulls his gloves off to shake them out. The woman circles them, slow and critical. It raises the hair on Gale's arms.

"You married?" she asks.

"Uh, yes," John says. "Newlyweds, in fact."

"Because you've got no rings," the woman says. "And I don't let unmarried couples room in my home, see."

John doesn't even pause. "Of course—"

"If you're so newly wed, you'll have your wedding rings, won't you?"

"Won't we?" John says.

He sounds both perplexed and defensive. Gale grabs John's hand and feels John settle against him.

"We're not married," Gale says. "But he's due in San Antonio tomorrow. He's newly enlisted. Please."

He has no idea if that's the right answer, just knows this woman is too smart and too stubborn to argue with. And out of the three of them, he and John are the ones that need a place to stay for the night. The woman grabs the breast of her apron.

"Oh good lord," she says. "And you came out here with him when you're fighting such an awful cold."

"Laryngitis, ma'am," John adds.

Gale fights not to pinch the tender skin of his hand. His voice sounds fine.

"My name is Doris. But I can't have unmarried couples rooming here. It's just not proper." She gives them both a long, appraising look. "Is it serious, then, with you two?"

Gale knows what she means by *serious*, but it's not until he glances at John and sees that he's waiting for Gale's answer that Gale knows they're doing this. They can read it in each other's eyes.

"Yes," they say in unison.

Doris softens her stance. Her eyes brighten. Gale lets her watch them and thinks that's it, she's swayed by the idea of John's sweetheart coming with him to see him off before he joins the war effort and will let them room together tonight despite being unmarried. The whole thing is cloying enough, patriotic and full of young romance.

Then Doris says, "In that case, I can have the Justice of the Peace here in about an hour, have you both married proper. I'll even throw in dinner and take five dollars off the room, since this young man is about to go off and serve our country."

Gale's brain fuzzes out. He understands what she means immediately, no room for misunderstanding, he just can't get himself to speak. He starts to go limp until John's grip on his hand tightens, breath squeezing out.

"Let me just talk to—" John pulls Gale towards the door. "—Give me and my girl here a minute."

Doris says she will, and walks through a swinging door into another room. They're alone. John leans into Gale, his breath warm and sharp.

"Gale, talk to me, are we doing this?"

Gale can barely hear him over the static in his ears. Like he keeps trying to tune into a radio station and can't hit the right frequency.

"You want to go?" he asks.

"No, of course not, I want to—" John bites his lip. His eyes are bright, a little panicked. When he laughs, he sounds hysterical. "We're crazy for this, though, aren't we?"

One of us is, Gale thinks. John scrubs his hand over his chin. He looks nervous, and won't meet Gale's eyes. He's got a little mole on his chin that Gale noticed when they first met and can't stop noticing. This small part of him that Gale wants to covet. Doesn't want anyone else to know about. He feels so guilty for making John a part of this terrible charade, and doesn't want to let him go all the same. His guts are swimming loose in his stomach.

"It's not real," Gale says.

John blinks at him, says, "Yeah, I know."

The wind howls again outside, has the wood creaking, the glass

windows rattling. Gale watches dirt spit down the road. They're so close to the end, now. Even if John did want to marry him, it doesn't work like that between two men. And Gale doesn't want to be a woman, but he thinks, in some horrible part of his mind, how easy this would all be if he was.

"I know," John says again, then calls for Doris.

Doris separates them. Bad luck, she says, for the groom to see the bride before the wedding. She ushers Gale upstairs to another room and begins immediately fussing after him. Without John close by, Gale is less certain what he should say, how he should act. He sits on a velvet stool in front of a wooden vanity and takes in the room: the faded rose wallpaper, the canopy bed, the lace curtains filtering the sun. There's a photo of a man in military dress from The Great War on the vanity. Doris' husband, maybe. This is her own room.

"Do you have any other clothes with you, dear?" Doris asks.

Gale shakes his head. John had introduced them both downstairs and explained that Gale's suitcase was stolen in Lubbock as the two of them were coming in from Oklahoma, which was a half-truth. She had been appalled, then chastised John for letting a young woman like Gale make the trip with him.

"Well, we'll make do," Doris says. "You're too tall and too skinny to fit my clothes, but I have a lovely ribbon you can borrow for your hair, and some pearls, somewhere."

"I couldn't," Gale says.

He truly doesn't want to. The last time he went to a wedding was for Thomas, in college, and he hadn't paid much attention to what his bride was wearing. Gale can't even remember her name. Doris tuts at him, already digging around in her closet.

"You can't get married in a hat."

She comes back over with a ribbon scarf, sky blue. Gale holds his hands out to take the fabric from her so she doesn't try and fix his hair herself and realize he's got a wig on. The ribbon feels soft under his fingers, slippery.

"I'll fix you some lemon and honey tea for that cold while you freshen up," Doris says. "Then find those damn pearls."

Gale "freshens up" by shaving in the attached bathroom while Doris is downstairs. He's never had to shave so much in his life. Back home, Gale often kept a bit of a beard, especially when he worked the oil fields. He misses feeling stubble on his face. He unpins his hat and wraps the scarf like a band around his wig, then ties it to a neat bow at the top, the way he used to tie the ribbons on his sister's dresses when she was younger. He slides the pins back in and shakes his head. The wig seems fine. Secure. Gale looks softer in a ribbon than a hat, eyes popped a brighter blue.

"Gail?" Doris knocks on the door. "I've got your tea."

"Alright," Gale says.

He unbutton his blazer as he walks back to the vanity stool and sits, oddly calm. Unsure how much time has passed. He'll be back downstairs soon and marrying John. None of that will be real, but happening anyway. The thought flows over Gale like a daydream he can't grasp hold of. Doris sets down his tea and gasps, coos.

"You look lovely," she says. "Ready to be a bride. Your fella won't know what hit him."

Gale takes the mug of tea between his hands and holds the hot ceramic, palms burning.

"Don't be nervous," Doris says. "I married my Robert much the way you and your John are doing things. Right before he left for France. It's a long wait, but worth it. We women have important work to do here while the men are away, keeping up the home. Raising children."

Gale knows her husband is dead, not from the war, from something else, and he won't ask. Doris' voice holds something wistful in its tone, and Gale's brain and heart hurt trying to understand how. The things she describes make Gale feel like a dog collared and licking its leash. Staring out at a long, desperately lonely life and pretending it's what he wants. He feels terrible for her. It's not anything Gale wants. He's not a man who stays at home waiting. He is going to fight.

Gale takes a sip of his tea and lets that burn too. Doris opens a drawer in the vanity and titters with excitement, pulls out a long coil of pearls.

"I wore these when I married Robert," she says. "Haven't gotten much use since, so you'll wear them too."

She holds them up to Gale's neck and laughs, deep and throaty.

"You might be skinnier than me, but my, your shoulders are broad as a man's."

Gale holds himself rigid, inhaling to compress himself smaller. All Doris does is loop the pearls around his neck as the doorbell rings. It cuts through the blankness of Gale's brain and forces him to realize what's about to happen.

"That'll be the Justice of the Peace," Doris says. "Stay here. I'll check on the groom and get everything ready."

She leaves. Gale drinks more tea, the pearls shifting around his neck, a long, long line, slipping along his broad shoulders and trapping him.

His tea is nearly gone when Doris comes back to walk him down. Gale isn't even sure what part of the house they're going to. It's all an automatic movement, him getting up from the stool and letting Doris guide him to the top of the stairs. Gale hears voices from downstairs, but not John's. He pauses on the landing. Doris urges him forward with her palm to his back.

"Go on," she says. "He's waiting for you."

Each step comes one at a time, creaking underneath Gale's feet. He has nothing to hold onto, descends, the lights warmer down below. He's halfway down when he catches sight of John at the bottom of the stairs. Watching.

John's hair is slicked back, suit jacket buttoned up. He's holding a bunch of flowers in his hand that look as though they've been picked from the side of the road or stolen from a vase. Gale wouldn't put either prospect past him. John isn't looking anywhere but at Gale, like Gale walked out of some place he didn't know existed. His eyes are dewy, and Gale writes that off to the wind and dust.

"Hey," John says, one soft breath.

He hands Gale the flowers once he gets to the bottom of the stairs. They're fragrant and sweet in Gale's nose. Gale has no idea what he should say, and is blessedly saved from having to say anything when the Justice of the Peace moves them into the sitting room for the ceremony. There are two witnesses along as well who turn out to be another couple rooming for the rest of the week.

The Justice of the Peace has John and Gale stand in front of the fireplace and face each other. Doris takes the flowers from Gale so he can take hold of John's hands. Hold him and marry him. John's hands aren't much bigger than Gale's, just thicker, and his thumb is stroking softly along Gale's skin and Gale wants to sit fast and hard to the ground. If he were a better man he'd look away from John, because he's selling this too well, staring at Gale like he really wants to marry him, been waiting years to join hands like this. Gale doesn't dare wonder what his own face is broadcasting.

The string of pearls is so long that Doris wraps it around both of them, like a tether, a voluntary leash. Gale feels tucked in and flayed open and somehow, safe.

He doesn't even realize the ceremony has started until things are nearly over, the words jolting him back to the present.

"...We are here to bear witness to the joining of this man and woman in matrimony. To be with them, and rejoice with them, in the making of this very important commitment."

More words. Gale can't feel his body and isn't convinced it's a bad thing.

"Do you, John Egan, take—" the Justice pauses. "Forgive me, I did not get the girl's last name."

"Cleven," Gale says, not thinking, only speaking.

John barely reacts, other than a shimmer across the whites of his eyes, his hands twitching in Gale's own.

"Do you, John Egan, take Gail Cleven to be your wife from this day forward, to honor and to cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and will be faithful to her for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," John says.

The same is repeated for Gale, though he barely hears the words, only sees John. Sees John watching him.

"I do," Gale says.

Things fuzz more after that. Gale wants to listen, only he can't. He said the words and he's on automatic again, he thinks. Mind and body moving for him. The next thing he hears is, "—it is my great honor and privilege to pronounce you married. You may now kiss the bride!"

Gale's body lands immediately. He looks at John, struck with terror for the first time, not at the idea of kissing him, but of people he doesn't know seeing. Kissing John for the first time like this, with an audience. John's brief, understanding smile dents his cheek. He leans in and kisses Gale's cheek, plush and deliberate, then pulls back. Someone claps. Gale has no idea who. The world has narrowed down to him and John strung between a set of pearls.

It's not real.

It feels real as anything.

That should be the end of it other than signing the marriage license. John and Gale hang a moment with the Justice to sign their names and hopefully put this to rest. Only, Doris is waiting patiently with a brownie camera as they finish up the paperwork.

"Let me take a few photos," she says. "You only get married once, after all."

"Oh," says Gale. "That's not—"

"Sure," John says. "That'd be swell."

He surprises Gale by saying that. Maybe out of hospitality or commitment. Gale and John stand by the fireplace again, the pearl necklace looped around both of them. It drapes heavily over Gale's left shoulder as John stands behind him and wraps a small cord of the pearls around his fingers, hand resting against Gale's shoulder blade.

"That's beautiful," Doris says. "Just the sweetest thing."

Gale looks at the camera, not John. He hears Doris tell John to kiss Gale's shoulder, then feels it as John's lips kiss against the fabric of his blouse. The camera snaps. The flash makes Gale dizzy. He dips his neck to where John lips are lingering, eyes shut, as if he'd stay there

all night, and stares, heart tickling his ribcage. Then John's eyes open, bright, catch Gale's own. The camera goes off again.

"Gorgeous." Doris sets the camera on the mantel. "I'll have these developed."

"You can send 'em to me on base," John says. "I'll keep the photos tucked in my bunk."

Gale wants to snap at him despite the heat that flints his ears at the obvious suggestion in John's words. They've sold this too goddamn well. They can't have these photos on them when they get to base. Gale takes one of the pearls between his fingers and rolls it back and forth, squeezes. He wants to feel the pearl burst underneath his fingers. John's hand is still on his shoulder.

He can see the marriage license on the table, signed and dated. *Gail Cleven. John Egan.* John's thumb brushes the bare skin of Gale's neck. The pearl rolls solid between Gale's fingers.

The whole house is quiet. John and Gale are on the top floor, surrounded by wind and the occasional distant whistle of a train. Otherwise, neither of them has said a word since they got to their room. Some hazy reality has settled now that they're alone, something different Gale is afraid to name. The marriage license is being taken to city hall. There's a dinner Doris prepared but they haven't managed to eat. She has the pearls back, but the blue ribbon scarf is still tied to Gale's head. He takes it off along with the wig in the bathroom.

"You're awful quiet," John says through the door.

Gale unbuttons his shirt and unhooks the brassiere.

"I'm usually quiet, Bucky."

"But it's our wedding night." John's palm thumps against the door. "Sorry. I don't know what to say, Buck."

Gale hangs up the shirt, guilty again. John did this for him, paid for them to stay here, paid for the marriage license, and Gale is hiding in the bathroom like a goddamn coward. He rubs at the red marks left by the brassiere, massaging the itch from his skin, then scratches at the

sparse hair on his chest.

"You can come in, Bucky," he says.

John opens the bathroom door slowly. He looks shy, boyish. Dressed down to his undershirt and trousers. He steps into the bathroom and shuts the door halfway so he can fit.

"Your hair's all flat," he says, then musses at Gale's hair, shakes his fingers through the strands until it's tumbling all over Gale's forehead.

Gale swats at his hand.

"I'm helping you." John pushes the hair back from Gale's face, the tug sharp in a good way. "Shame you'll have to cut it shorter for the Army."

"Mmhmm," Gale says.

He doesn't trust himself to speak more than that. He digs through the medicine cabinet for some kind of a cream, but there's only a rusty old razor, a half-full tube of toothpaste, Vaseline, and a brown button. John's hand leaves his hair and touches his waist as he leans forward to examine the button. Gale is in just the skirt and girdle and stockings, can feel John's shirt against his back. He grips the sink.

"You're being awful quiet, Buck," John says again, and sets the button down.

"I'm—" Gale swallows. "You want me to shout, or something?"

"I think that's what Doris is expecting."

"*Jesus*, John."

Gale goes to elbow him and holds in place when John's hand grips tighter to his waist.

"It's our wedding night," John says, soft now, serious.

Gale looks back at him. He wishes John were better at hiding himself, because Gale can see everything right now—the little flush high up on his cheekbones, the want in his eyes, how he's putting himself in Gale's hands with a question he hasn't even asked. Gale holds the sink tighter. It doesn't stop him from shaking.

John sighs, breath uneven. Gale thinks he might be trembling too.

"Buck," he says. "I know tonight wasn't—Christ, I know tonight was crazy, okay? Just—give me something to go on, here."

His fingers are rubbing along Gale's skin. Gale can't take it anymore. He turns around. *It wasn't real*, Gale wants to say. The words don't seem important at all with John's hand on him. Gale is an invert, he knows this. His father always called him soft, and he meant Gale was soft like this, soft for a man's touch. Weak for the thing he shouldn't have.

"What do husbands and wives do on their wedding night, John?" he asks.

"They—" John pauses, fingertip dipping just below the waistline of Gale's skirt. He's not suave and bold right now, he's uncertain and Gale wants him. "Oh Christ, Buck."

John kisses him as he's finishing the name. Kisses him the way he should've downstairs, full-mouthed, pushing Gale back against the sink. It cuts something loose and wild in Gale. He opens his mouth, lets John in, lets him just take. John's other hand caresses Gale's face. Clings to him. Gale follows John's mouth, pelvis pulling tight.

Gale reaches for the button on his skirt and blindly yanks it loose so he can unzip the side. He has to push John back a little to let the skirt drop to the floor and kick it to the side, nothing on him now but the girdle and stockings. John is looking at him with lipstick smeared all over his mouth. Gale seems to have rendered him temporarily speechless. He turns back to the sink and grips the porcelain, feels John's hands come to his hips immediately.

"Buck," he says.

John's hard dick pushes against the swell of Gale's ass, trapped in his trousers. He sounds halfway to wrecked and all they've done is kiss. Gale himself is painfully hard, his own cock still tucked in the girdle.

"What else," Gale says. "What else do a husband and wife do on their wedding night?"

John's mouth brushes against his shoulder. He kisses along the bare skin, takes his time, hands rubbing at Gale's chest, his stomach, too, where he's compressed by the girdle. John reaches for the hook of the girdle and Gale grabs his wrist. There's a swallow against his shoulder blade. John's hot breath on his skin, gentle.

"Hey," he says. "It's just you and me, Buck."

Gale doesn't know why he's saying that. He knows why John came in here. Gale's giving him everything he wants. He curls his knuckles and swallows the spit in his mouth.

"I'm your wife, John. Fuck me like I am."

John watches him in the mirror. His expression ripples, then hardens, turns to something else.

"Yeah?" he says. "That what you want? Want to be my pretty wife, Gale?"

Gale nods, frantic. He just wants. John reaches past him into the medicine cabinet again for the tin of vaseline and Gale's heart kicks. He hears John panting and moving and then his slick finger slips between Gale's cheeks and Gale arches back, ready before he even knew he had to be. John groans behind him, finger resting against the hot clutch of Gale's hole and doing nothing else.

"Come on," Gale says.

And like that, John's finger pushes inside him, all sweet, hot pressure. Gale's smeared red mouth drops open only no sound comes out, not until John moves, then Gale moans like he's being choked. John's hand pets down his side and grabs hold of the garter strap laid tight over his ass, snaps it once. Gale jerks back at the sweet sting against his skin. He wants more. He tells John to give him more.

"Gotta be patient." John pants against his neck. "Didn't you save yourself for me?"

Gale wonders if he knows how true that actually is. That Gale has never done this before. He tells John again to give him more anyway, doesn't ask, tells, and all John does is add a second finger. It stings. Gale bows his head and bites his tongue against the feeling. John moves so slow that Gale wants it to keep stinging, but after a while he feels that good pressure inside himself again.

John gives him more without him having to ask. Three fingers in all. He fingers Gale like he'd do it all night, says over and over again how gorgeous he looks in those stockings, that goddamn girdle.

"How'd I get so lucky, getting a girl like you to marry me?"

He says it as he's pulling his fingers out. The fantasy of it all is so shameful it's morphed into something erotic. Gale reaches up his girdle and untucks his cock because he can't take the pressure anymore. He moans outright when the air hits him, pre-come slicking his fingers. Behind him, John undoes his trousers.

"Make it good," Gale says. "Or I won't write to you while you're at war."

"Gale, Christ, your mouth, baby."

The head of John's cock presses against his hole. He feels huge and inescapable.

"You on a contraceptive, sweetheart?" he asks.

Gale flushes. "*John*—"

He pushes back, whimpers when John shuffles forward and pops past his rim. John's hands pinch hard at Gale's sides to stop from going any further.

"F-fuck," John says. "Fuck, oh my god. Not so fast."

John urges Gale forward again, gentle, a bit more of him slipping inside. A harsh noise punches its way out of Gale's mouth. It's all pressure, more pressure, his body opening and closing around John's dick. Then the pressure becomes a low fizz of pleasure that builds. His ass settles into the cradle of John's hips.

The whole thing feels slow, careful, until John grinds into him and Gale feels a hit of pleasure so intense he sags forward against the mirror, arms barely holding him upright. His breath fogs the glass, hands slippery, John thrusting into him, another burst of pleasure getting him in the knees. Gale is moaning and he can't stop himself.

"Feels so good," John says.

Gale doesn't know if he's asking or telling. He keens when John reaches between his legs and takes hold of his cock.

"God, you're so wet for me," John says. "You're my sweetheart, ain't you? My babydoll, my best girl."

The pleasure hits Gale so sharply it doesn't have time to turn to shame. John's hand strokes up and down his cock and Gale realizes

that he really is wet, he's absolutely dripping.

"Prettiest damn thing," John says. "You think Doris can hear you screaming up here?"

"God," Gale says. "Oh, god."

"Yeah, screaming like that, fucking hell, Gale, let me take you to bed, please—"

"No." Gale arches back against him, head lolling on the dip of John's shoulder, toes curling against the floor as John works his cock. The bed makes it too real, makes it too much. Gale already feels like he lost control of this ages ago. John's teeth find his neck and scrape at the sweat slick skin.

"*Oh*," Gale says, speared on John, full up to his throat.

He comes on the word, face turned against John's shoulder, the force of his orgasm almost painful. It's easy for him to slump forward and rest his forearms on the sink as John rolls his hips a final few times, says, "Gale, Buck, *sweetheart*—" and comes inside him. Gale's forehead drops hard against the mirror. He smears lipstick along his own fogged up reflection.

There's a quiet roaring in Gale's ears that seems to grow louder and louder. He stares at the lipstick smudged over the mirror, his reflection clear now, John clear behind him, lips pressed to Gale's hair as he collects his breath. His body shiny with sweat and heaving. He rubs his hands over Gale's flank, from his hips to the shaven skin of his underarms, his softening cock a heartbeat inside of Gale.

"John," Gale says, more a rumble of breath than anything.

"You alright?"

John speaks against his hair. Gale nods, ears still full of that roaring. He bites his lip when John pulls out, shocked at the emptiness, how he runs cold, then how John literally starts to run out of him. Gale uses the sink for leverage and sits on the toilet so he can let it all leak out of him. Watches John tuck himself back into his trousers. John is watching him as well.

"Buck?"

"I'm alright," Gale says.

His legs are shaking. He feels turned inside out. John takes the dismissal for what it is and leaves the bathroom, but keeps the door open. Gale unhooks his stockings and rolls them down quickly, then unhooks the girdle. He leaves them on the floor. Wouldn't, normally. The roaring sound in his ears is in the wind, Gale realizes, skipping along the roof.

John is in his pajamas when Gale comes out of the bathroom and picking at their dinner. There are pajamas that Doris offered, but they're an actual nightgown, and Gale can't bear to get into them, especially not now. John's robe is hanging on the other side of the door, an obvious invitation, so Gale slips that on, pads to the bed and sits under the covers. John watches him again. There are lipstick traces on his mouth. He gets up and brings the tray of food to the bed, wordless, and sets it down on the mattress.

"Cold roast beef," he says. "But not bad. First time we've had three square meals in a few days."

"Raw carrots is not a square meal," Gale says.

He spears a slice of roast beef with his fork. They're talking, which feels unbelievable. The window rattles from the wind, and John smiles nervous around a mouthful of food.

"This morning feels like so long ago," he says.

He swallows, brows gone flat, clearly thinking about something, eyes set on the bedding. Gale wants to tell him that it's fine. Tomorrow, this night will feel like a long time ago as well. Then it'll be something to forget entirely. Like raw carrots eaten on the roadside. John says nothing, just eats, sat on top of the covers by Gale, the wind crying all night.

There are only five people waiting for the bus. The morning is brisk and sunny, the wind still blowing strong. Gale is sat on a bench next to a woman and her son, barely protected from the strong gusts by a rickety shield of plastic around them. John and another man are standing and braving the wind. It's almost eight o'clock.

Gale hadn't slept well at all last night, tucked in John's bathrobe, his body a pleasant kind of sore. He felt he might be able to reach the

soreness if he tried, and was tempted. Kept himself a frozen body on the bed instead and held off waking John until the alarm did. By then, Gale was already dressed and ready. They barely had time to eat breakfast and avoid Doris' knowing gaze. When Gale first attempted to return the ribbon scarf to her, she tried to let him keep it.

"I won't feel right doing that," Gale said, and meant every word.

Now, at the bus stop, John looks back at him. He smiles. Gale's whole body lights up at the memory of John inside him last night, how he called Gale his best girl. Shame and arousal curl in his gut. The smile Gale gives back feels like it's cutting his lips open.

The honk of a horn announces the bus's arrival. *San Antonio* is written above the windshield. Gale stands up, anxious to get on, afraid for no reason that someone is going to snatch him back to Wyoming when he's so close. John lines up next to Gale as the bus parks. There's dust clinging to the wool of his scarf, the brim of his hat, and caught in the short hairs of his mustache. Gale wants to pat him clean. His index finger twitches.

"What?" John says.

He smiles again, but it looks unsure. John's eyes always smile with him. It makes Gale want to ask him what's wrong, though he thinks he already knows. They haven't talked about last night. They *shouldn't* talk about last night. Gale was sure that he wouldn't want to. But faced with the reality of what's happened, Gale finds he wants to carve out a part of himself to give to John. An apology, perhaps. They can't go on pretending, and Gale doesn't want to live another lie. He takes John's hat from his hand and shakes it clean between them.

"You're dusty," Gale whispers.

John takes his hat back dumbly, then looks up at Gale and smiles with his eyes. Gale turns around. He gets on the bus.

They're in San Antonio before two o'clock. The bus pulls into a grand station in downtown, diesel smell tickling Gale's nostrils. The anxiety of making it to San Antonio fizzles away, replaced with a different, worse anxiety. He doesn't move as people begin to depart from the bus, just waits, even as John stands and grabs his suitcase. All around

him are people talking and horns honking.

The bus had been crowded on the way down and there was only a bit of scratch paper left. They played one round of hangman that Gale easily won because John chose the word "airplane." Then Gale wrote, *I need clothes.* John wrote back, *Don't worry about it.* They didn't write anything else.

He watches now as John unravels his scarf and shakes out the dust.

"Jesus, took about half the town with me in my scarf," John says. "Come on, Gale, let's get you some new clothes."

That propels Gale into motion. He walks with John through the bus terminal, the air sharp but easier to breathe than the constant wind from earlier. They step out into downtown, buildings and cars and people. There's sunshine despite the chilly air. John looks around like he knows where he's going.

"Bucky," Gale says.

"You're okay with The Salvation Army, right?" John sniffs and rubs at his nose. "Bus driver said there was one about a block away. Think it's to the left."

Gale doesn't remember when John even talked to the bus driver. Was it this one, or another? He wants to say no as badly as he wants to be in trousers again. John lights a cigarette, casual, then cranes his neck over a mass of people walking around them like he can see a block away.

"John," Gale says. "Look at me."

John looks at him.

"This is the last thing I'll ever ask of you," Gale says.

John's cigarette sits limp in his mouth, curling smoke. Gale watches the cherry burn. The paper singes as John inhales deeply, plucks the cigarette from his mouth and holds it between his fingers.

"Don't say that, Gale, I love when you ask me for things." John exhales and puts the cigarette between his lips again. "Let's go left, yeah? What size is your waist, a twenty-eight?"

He starts walking. Gale wants to tell him stop that, *stop it*, this is

serious. This whole thing might be a game to John, but it's not to Gale. They've been pretending to be married for days and Gale thinks he might've cracked from it all. He thinks if yesterday had been real, he wouldn't have said no. Would've really married John.

All that sits in Gale's throat. He swallows it, swallows it, swallows it.

He says, "Christ's sake, I'm a size thirty."

In front of him, John laughs, smoke billowing out of his mouth and nose. Gale swallows.

He's back in men's clothes within the hour. A double-breasted suit and tie, shoes, socks, all second-hand. They fit well enough. The only thing he has to forgo is underwear. Gale sneaks into an alleyway to change with John keeping watch. The ground is sticky and sour. There is a dumpster right there for Gale to toss the clothes Marge gave him, things she said she didn't expect back, and Gale still hesitates. He fingers the fabric of the girdle, strangely mournful.

"Buck, how's it going?" John asks.

"Almost done."

Gale throws everything into the dumpster except for his ID, toothpicks, and razor. Throws out the stockings and girdle last.

The only thing they have to get the lipstick off is a handkerchief and John's whiskey. Gale doesn't know if that's ironic, funny, or just pathetic. He wets the handkerchief and rubs at his lips. They tingle. The handkerchief comes away red.

"You're good," John tells him, and pockets the handkerchief. "We should get directions to the enlistment office."

Gale rubs absently at his lips. He's tempted to lick over them.

"You don't have to come with me, Bucky."

"I've got time. I can see you off."

Gale licks his lips when John turns around. The taste there is sharp and a little bitter.

He and John get directions from a police officer to the enlistment office, a ten minute walk up the same street. For a moment, Gale forgets that he's not pretending to be a woman anymore. Men are looking at his face again, talking to him. *He* can talk. It's a strange feeling. Stranger still is how John keeps staring at him like nothing has changed, when everything has.

Gale allows himself to wonder if maybe John didn't fuck him last night because Gale was dressed like a woman. If he's sticking around right now, stuck around the whole time, for another reason entirely. The prospect feels impossible to Gale. He doesn't operate like that, with the naive hope of possibility. There's always less disappointment in reality.

As they come upon the enlistment office, they linger outside the edge of the building. There's a man in uniform standing at attention by the door. He ignores them. *This is it,* Gale thinks, right as John says the words.

"Well, this is it," John says.

He's smiling, got that earnest, vulnerable look in his eyes. Gale crosses his arms over his chest, feeling exposed and a little chilly without the comforting compression of the girdle. John sets his suitcase down and unwraps his scarf.

"Here," he says. "Take it."

Gale steps back. "Bucky, no—I don't need—"

"Help?" John says. "Thought we got past that in Colorado. Come on, take it. Not like I won't see you on base, Mrs. Egan."

He grins crooked and winks as he holds the scarf against Gale's crossed arms, relentless. Gale's throat slams shut. He knows what the wool will smell like, like John and nicotine, faintly of Gale himself. Perhaps a bit like bus diesel. And every time he wears it, he'll be reminded of pretending to be John's wife, of spreading his legs and pretending. Being a sham of a woman and a joke of a man and none of things John actually wants. *Mrs. Egan.* The reality is somehow still disappointing. Gale shoves him back.

"Bucky, *stop*."

John steadies himself with the heel of his shoe, frowns.

"What?"

"I'm not your goddamn—" Gale takes a breath. "It was fun, okay? I get it, but you don't need to pretend anymore, so just stop."

Gale exhales, but nothing feels better. In front of him, John's face becomes flat, tense. His arm drops to his side, scarf hanging limp. Gale watches his jaw twitch. He's angry. The urge to apologize fills Gale's mouth and he's not sure why or what to say. He is struck with the sudden knowledge that something unique and profound has just ruptured.

John grabs his suitcase and throws his scarf over his shoulder without bothering to wrap it back around his neck. He opens his mouth, then shuts it, then opens it again.

"Alright, Buck," he says.

Watching John walk away hurts. Gale watches anyway. He watches until John is swallowed by the city, and a little after, simply because moving doesn't seem possible. But Gale has to move, so he opens the door to the enlistment office and steps inside. The air in the office is warm and stale and makes Gale a little dizzy. He stands in the entrance of the building and hesitates for the first time.

He wonders what John was going to say before he decided to walk away. He didn't just look angry, he looked hurt. Gale wants to turn around and go after him. Only, he's here now. This is what he meant to do all along. Gale steadies himself and steps towards the recruitment officer at the front desk.

It's unlikely he'll see John so much on base anyway.

John is Gale's goddamn roommate.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Buck, I'm fucking terrified," John says.

Gale doesn't know what he expected him to say. It wasn't that.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never—I've never felt like this before."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John is propped in his bunk studying when Gale comes back from his walk. He rolls his toothpick from the left corner of his mouth to the right, eyes focused on John's forehead. A month of PT and John has gotten broader, thicker, causes the mattress to groan when he's shifting in bed at night. Gale presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

"Bucky."

John sets his papers on his thighs and pulls his attention to Gale.

"What do you need, Buck?"

"How much do I owe you?" Gale asks. "From when you spotted me."

He doesn't elaborate further, figures he doesn't have to. Bringing this up already had him worked up to the point that Gale couldn't finish his supper tonight. Took himself for a walk instead. John sits next to him most nights, so he noticed, must have noticed, and being John, kindly said nothing. Gale shoves his hands into the pockets of his trousers. From his bunk, John shrugs.

"Not sure, honestly. Didn't keep the receipts."

"Rough estimate, then," Gale says.

John shrugs again. "Five dollars."

Gale flushes, from shame, he thinks. His hands curl to fists in his pockets.

"Bucky, I'm serious. I pay my debts."

John tosses his papers onto the mattress and shakes his head, eyes going soft, mutters, "Jesus, Gale, you drive me crazy."

Gale leans forward, feet planted on the floor. If he wasn't meant to hear that, John should've spoken a lot quieter. Between the two of them, he's not sure who's more stubborn.

"What's that?" he says.

"Twenty dollars," John says. "That make you happy?"

"It does."

Gale twists the toothpick back and forth in his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. He is happy. He's not like his father. And while he'd rather have every cent accounted for, this will do for now.

"Good, then I'm happy," John says.

He rubs at his jaw before picking up his papers again. Gale looks away even though they're not making eye contact anymore, grabs twenty dollars from his wallet and places the money on John's bunk, slides it close to his hip with two fingers. John takes the bill and folds it into his trouser pocket. His voice stops Gale before he can step away fully.

"I wouldn't have cared if never you paid me back, you know," he says.

"Yeah," Gale says. "But I care."

John nods slowly. He could be thinking about Bill, a gun pointed at him in Oklahoma, Gale's father using his own son as collateral.

"I know, Buck," he says.

The room is already small, and now it feels smaller. Gale pricked by the too sharp, too knowing gaze John is giving him again. A sort of intimacy not meant for men who are just friends. Gale steps out of the space holding him close to John's bunk and sits on his own to card through his belongings.

He wrote to Marge once he was officially enlisted and asked her if she would help his mother ship his things. A letter to his mother was included in the envelope. He didn't write to his father. Gale isn't sure what to say to him yet. If he wants to say anything at all. He received clothes and books almost two weeks ago, and a letter from his mother

saying he was no longer engaged to Esther Fennick. Gale doesn't know what that means for his father. His mother hadn't included any details, only well wishes, and the hope he would be safe should the United States ever enter the war.

"Did you know you can go up to 287 miles per hour in a B-17?" John says. "Tell me you don't think that's swell, Buck."

Gale smiles. They spent an hour yesterday talking about plane models, but it was the B-17 that John kept going back to. He's shown Gale photos, newspaper clippings, dogeared schematics that Gale isn't sure he should've had. Giddy and swollen with excitement.

"I think it's swell, Bucky. I'm not flying the big birds."

"Yeah, we'll see."

When Gale walked into his room that first day, John was already there, smoking a cigarette with the window cracked. Gale didn't know what to do with himself. They hadn't told him who his roommate would be. Apparently, they hadn't told John either. John stood slack jawed and baby eyed for all of five seconds before he stepped forward and shook Gale's hand.

"John Egan," he said. "But you can call me Bucky, everyone does. Nice to meet you."

Gale remembered to shake back. "Gale Cleven."

"You look like a Buck to me."

This was worse, Gale thought. Pretending they'd never met before. John's smile was fake, didn't reach his eyes. His hand rough and too cordial in Gale's own.

"John—"

"I met someone not too long ago named Buck."

John let go of his hand. Gale felt that knot forming between his brows. The silence between them became a distance.

"I don't know what to say," he said.

"I think you said enough the other day."

Gale flushed from a different type of shame.

He still couldn't apologize. He didn't know what he was apologizing *for*. Gale thought John might request a different room, because he certainly wasn't going to. He could endure. John didn't. They spent the week acting like the other was a piece of living furniture they had to navigate around. Chores and basic training ran them to pure exhaustion anyway. The hair on Gale's legs and underarms grew in itchy, then wiry and thick, as if it had never been gone. Gale tried to think of John as just another cadet, a brother in arms, not someone he'd slept in the same bed with, not someone he'd kissed and touched.

John had already made friends. Gale would hear the bass of his laugh in the mess during meals while he ate alone, kept to himself. John knew how to hype the men up during their runs. He could do things Gale didn't have the desire or the courage to do yet. Was still learning the other cadets, how they worked, what they might need from him, who would make it past the first week. Too shy to reveal himself.

The Monday of their second week, Gale sat down to breakfast, alone, and heard John say, "My buddy Buck over there, he wants to be a fighter pilot."

Gale looked up from his eggs. John waved him over, smile sleepy and friendly, while another cadet, whose name turned out to be Irving, said, "Buck? And you're Bucky? You're both Bucky? That's a riot!" Gale grabbed his tray and sat down next to John, who was laughing around his bacon.

"Yeah, ain't it just?" he said.

It was like John's anger slipped away. He called Gale "Buck" to every cadet they met. Now it's the only name Gale is called at all. John said that Gale reminded him of a guy he knew back in Manitowoc named "Buck" and that was that. Gale's never bothered to correct him. He might dare to think they're moving past what happened, except for the moments when what happened is the only thing in the room with them.

John goes out, sometimes. Into San Antonio. Gale has gone with him a few times, the other cadets trailing along, drinking and making a nuisance of themselves at a bar. Those outings, John is loose and affectionate. He throws an arm over the back of Gale's chair, his shoulders, pinches his cheeks. Boyish, platonic affection. Gale goes

bashful. He goes terrified. And he lets it happen.

Other times, John goes out alone, comes back alone, but smells like whiskey and some woman's perfume. Gale lies in his bunk and wonders who she was, how she was. All the ways she was better. Takes him weeks to identify the feeling as jealousy. With it comes the irrational, wild need to be cruel, to ask John if she knows what he and Gale did in Ballinger. To spit and to bite.

He says nothing, of course, until the night John comes back and climbs into Gale's bunk instead of his own. Still dressed, booze on his breath. Gale's body locks up.

"Wrong bunk," he says. "You're drunk."

The bunks are too small to be sharing like this. John is half on top of him, hard thigh draped over Gale's legs. He didn't put any of the lights on and all Gale can see is the outline of him in the dark. John and his too-many-girls back in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

"I'm not that sauced." John squeezes Gale's arm, nose smashed into the pillow next to Gale's head. "You should've come out tonight."

Gale can smell the perfume on him.

"Doubt your date would've appreciated that."

"Date? What date?" John's head pops up. "I took a few girls for a spin on the dance floor, that's all. Promise I behaved myself."

He smiles, wide and affectionate and if that's true, Gale is secretly, wrongfully happy. *Promise I behaved myself.* Gale has to fight to keep his breathing even. He doesn't think John realizes how close he is right now. What it would look like if someone walked in.

"You can do whatever you want, Bucky," he says.

The smile drops from John's face.

"Right, because I'm all fun, fun, fun? That it?"

"That's not what I meant," Gale says.

John pushes up and off him. He stumbles his way to standing, face cut sharp and hurt in the darkness.

"Sometimes I don't think you know *what* you mean, Buck."

He takes his jacket off and slides into his own bunk. Gale wants to apologize. He wants to ask John if he really did behave himself, and would he say it again sober. If he knows what any of this means anymore, because Gale doesn't. By the time his thoughts settle, John is snoring, and Gale thinks he might not remember this in the morning.

A letter from his father arrives a few weeks later. Gale recognizes his script before he sees his name, and his hands go numb taking the envelope. The voices of the other cadets become watery. Gale walks back to his room in the early spring heat. The envelope feels heavy. He sits on his bunk and thumbs the letter open with his breath choking his throat.

Gale,

It's an honorable thing you're doing, serving your country. Don't worry about me here. I'm working my way out of this mess, as a man does. My only wish is you could have come through for me, my boy. But I won't hold it against you. Be safe.

Truly,

Cleven Sr.

Gale stares at the script. He thinks about rolling the paper up into the smallest ball he can and chewing it to mush. All he manages to do is stare at the words, how his father compliments him in one sentence and insults him in the next. Him, a man, and Gale, nothing but a boy who needs to be forgiven for disobeying.

"Jesus," John says behind him.

Gale slams the letter face down on his bunk. He didn't hear John come in. He turns and John is already backing away and carding a hand nervously through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Sorry. You were looking so intense over there I came over—I shouldn't have looked—sorry, Buck."

Gale might have the anger to spare if John didn't already know. His fingers twitch away from the letter and settle in his lap. John isn't holding any mail of his own.

"Have you talked to your mom?"

He looks at the wall when he asks, not at John. A false sense of privacy.

"No," John says.

His admission is something Gale already knew. Despite everything that's happened between them, John would mention talking to his mother. Gale breathes out. He can hear John breathing steadily behind him.

"What do you think is worse, not hearing a thing, or hearing something like this?"

John sits on the bunk with him. His back touches Gale's, a whisper of fabric.

"Wish I knew," he says.

Gale nods, breathes, back pushing more firmly against John's. He grabs his father's letter and folds it back into its envelope, unsure exactly what emotion he's feeling, and if it's from the letter or from John's honesty. The kind he only seems to show around Gale. He turns his head and finds that John is already watching him. John's hand settles on top of Gale's.

The weight is shockingly heavy and reminds Gale of the weight of him the night they slept together. That night keeps turning over in his mind as a memory he wants to keep and throw away. There were parts of it that Gale enjoyed. He can admit that now. He enjoyed the constriction of the girdle, John snapping his garter, John's voice and how he fucked him. But he's not John's woman and doesn't want to be. Gale doesn't know how to reckon that. John might not have been attracted to Gale in the first place if he hadn't seen him all dolled up. How can he look at Gale and not see that?

Gale pulls his hand back.

"We have class in ten minutes."

He stands up. The letter from his father falls from his lap to the floor. After a second of hesitation, Gale walks to the door without picking the envelope back up. He waits for John. Whose eyes are following his every move. John gets up and rounds the bunk, picks up the fallen envelope and sets it on Gale's side table.

He walks to Gale. Smiling, somehow.

"I'd be late to every class if it wasn't for you," he says.

"I know," Gale says, feeling like a boy and a coward.

He's leaving class with John one day when a call comes in for him. A lieutenant waiting in the hallway asks for Gale by name and says there's a woman on the phone. Says it's about his mother.

"My mother?" Gale says, already moving, feeling John moving with him until he's stopped. Nothing but Gale's roommate and friend who can't join such a personal call.

Gale follows the lieutenant to his office and waits for the door to shut before picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Is this Gale Cleven?" a woman asks.

"Yes, who is this? Is my mother alright?"

Gale holds the entire telephone in his hand. It's a nice, heavy weight. He can't really feel anything else.

"Your mother is fine," the woman says. "I'm sorry to fib like that, but they said I could only talk to you if it was an emergency. This is Esther Fennick—you remember me?"

Gale sits on the edge of the desk. He sets the phone down, receiver still tucked to his ear. The heel of his foot thuds against the wood of the desk.

"I remember you," he says.

"I thought we should talk."

There doesn't seem to be any other choice but agreement, so Gale does. Esther has the voice of a woman who went to private schools. Hits her consonants perfectly. She's a year older than Gale is, and can ride a horse as well as him, if not better.

"I don't blame you for running off, you know," Esther says. "I almost did the same thing myself. No one even asked me if I wanted to get married."

"Really now?" Gale says, blinking into the empty office, dumbstruck.

"Really. I know you were in quite a situation, but believe me when I tell you that no one ever bothers asking a woman how she might feel about getting married off to a fella she barely knows."

Gale rubs his palm down his thigh. "I do believe you."

"I needed you to understand—I needed you to know that I'm not the kind of woman my father is. I told him to stop bothering you. I told him to stop, and if he didn't, I'd call the cops on him."

Esther's voice is calm and reasonable, but Gale can hear the barely restrained anger underneath her words, a near lifetime of holding back. Gale feels he knows her better now than the few times he met her, when she was forced to be poised and meek.

"When did you tell him this?" he asks.

"Less than a week after you left, I suppose," Esther says. "Only I couldn't figure out where you were for the longest time to tell you. He hasn't bothered you, has he?"

"No, not at all."

Gale understands why, now. In some other life, he might have talked to Esther, and never had to escape on a bus. Over the line, Esther sighs, relieved. She says she's glad, because she doesn't really want to call the cops on her father. She loves him still, for all his faults. Then she apologizes again for lying about his mother.

"I saw her two days ago leaving the shoe repair shop. Picture of health."

The image makes Gale homesick. He used to walk into town with his mother every Sunday to help her with her errands. He thanks Esther anyway.

"Goodbye, Gale Cleven," she says.

Gale hangs up the phone and lies to the lieutenant that his mother is sick but is expected to make a full recovery.

He walks back to his room thinking of Esther threatening her father. He feels a bit cowardly for never having done the same to his own. Gale isn't sure what he could have possibly threatened him with. Not the cops, not taking away his alcohol. And Gale never considered his father a source of danger until recently. A man who was very pleasant when he wasn't drinking. Apologized every time he'd ever hit Gale. Usually, he'd done it on accident.

In the soft spring heat, Gale thinks of his father as pathetic for the first time. He thinks that is how he'll forgive him. Like forgiving a mad dog when he bites. There's no hurt in that revelation. Just the long, tired burden of family.

John is pacing their room when Gale gets there. He singes his fingers on his cigarette as he snuffs it out in the ashtray when he sees Gale, movements a little manic. Worried.

"Your mom alright, Buck?" he asks.

He shakes his hand out, fingers smudged black from the burnt tobacco. Gale's chest blooms warm.

"She's perfect, Bucky," he says. "Never better."

Next mail call, John disappears.

Gale goes back to their room and he's not there. It sparks Gale's nerves. They have a routine and this is how things always go, especially now, when all the cadets are about to take their weekend leave. He sits in his bunk and reads a well-worn copy of *Riders of the Purple Sage*, not really reading.

John comes in an hour later. He's holding a thick white envelope that's been opened. He's a bit sweaty in his uniform, as if he's been walking a while. Gale watches John sit over the top of his novel and tap his thumbs against the envelope, body heavy on his bunk. It's pointless to ask what's inside. If Gale is good at saying nothing, John is just as good at deflecting. He goes back to his novel, still not reading the words much. Hears it, when John gets up. He sets the envelope on the edge of Gale's thigh.

John's name is on the envelope, which has Gale confused for all of a

second before he sees where the envelope arrived from. Ballinger, Texas. Gale's throat clogs up. He drops his book and turns the envelope upside down so the contents fall out. There's a letter, but Gale ignores that for the two photographs.

Him and John on their wedding night, wrapped in a long string of pearls, Gale staring at the camera, John kissing his shoulder. Even without color Gale can remember all the details perfectly. The blue of the ribbon scarf, the feel of the wig, John's hand in his. Gale is looking at John in the second photograph, and John is looking back. He's looking at Gale like—

Gale flips to the first photo, back to the second. The first again. He remembers all the details but he doesn't remember this. He doesn't remember John looking at him like *this*.

"Bucky."

His voice comes out scraped up. Thick.

"You want me to toss them?" John asks.

Gale snaps his head up. John is watching him carefully. He means it.

"No," Gale says.

He doesn't know what else to say. Jesus, he doesn't know what to say. He pulls his legs in to make more room on his bunk, still holding the photos, and hopes John takes the invitation for what it is. John stands there, hesitates, first finger twitching against his leg, before he finally sits on Gale's bunk with him. He looks at the photos and rubs over the back of his neck.

"Buck, I'm fucking terrified," he says.

Gale doesn't know what he expected him to say. It wasn't that.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never—I've never felt like this before. I didn't know I could feel like this about a man. I had no clue. It was never serious before. It was just another itch to scratch, yeah?" John pauses, swallows, working past something in his throat. "It wasn't supposed to be serious if it was two fellas."

Before. How many times before? John goes around with such an easy,

light air about him that Gale nearly forgets he keeps parts himself closed off as well. It would not have occurred to him that John ever felt shame around being queer. That he *was* queer. Gale didn't know. He didn't *know.* He feels like that's the only thought he's been able to identify in the past two minutes. He didn't know any of this, not one goddamn bit.

"Gale," John says. "Baby, you make me dizzy, don't you know that?"

The room seems to inhale, then hold its breath, now small and contained to just the two of them. Like if Gale walked out the door, he'd walk right off the edge of the earth. A lot of nothing and everything makes sense. Gale worries his thumb over the edge of the photographs, unable to look away from John. He'll have eyes on him either way.

"I was a woman, though," he says.

John watches him, face scrunched. "I mean, you were in women's clothes, sure."

"It was more than that," Gale says. "I had to pretend—*we* had to pretend—that night in Ballinger, you wanted...you wanted me like a woman."

John rubs over the back of his neck again, faster, this time, head shaking tightly, lips going taut as his jaw clenches.

"That wig was too tight on your head, Buck. I wanted you however you wanted me. You told me to fuck you like you were my wife."

"Because you wanted—"

"Gale, you didn't ask what I wanted!"

John pushes himself off the bunk. For a moment, Gale thinks he's going to leave, and his body washes cold at the thought, but John just paces the small length of their room. Caged up, frustrated. He didn't ask what John wanted, did he? He assumed. Gale couldn't imagine John wanting him any other way. John is telling him in almost certain terms now and Gale still can't really imagine it's true.

He assumed what John wanted because all other options led to being hurt. The way, perhaps, Thomas assumed back in college. Gale had never really considered that before. That by all measure, Thomas may have been terrified of Gale. Ashamed of himself.

"I didn't think you could—" Gale's voice catches somewhere in his chest. "—I couldn't see how you would want that."

John's pacing stops. He leans against their shared desk a moment, arms crossing his chest.

"I thought it was obvious," he says, voice softer and a bit petulant.

"It wasn't," says Gale.

Maybe it should've been. Gale doesn't really have any experience with this, whatever this is. He knew John liked him, he did, but he thought it was a fantasy, or a fetish, something Gale is now realizing doesn't even line up with who he knows John to be as a person. He finally looks at the letter included with the photos. It's from Doris, naturally.

Mr. Egan, she's written,

I hope you'll be pleased with the photographs from your wedding night! God bless you for your service to our country. Please send along my kindest regards to Mrs. Egan. What a lovely young couple you are.

Sincerely,

Doris

John had asked for these. He wanted them taken. And more than that, he wanted to keep them.

"You really didn't—" Gale sets the letter down. "It wasn't just because I was in a skirt?"

"Jesus, no," John says. "I mean you look great in stockings, Buck, but it was always you, yeah? It was always you."

He says it so easily, even with the safety of some distance. Gale watches John rock against the desk, stance softening further. Seems like he wants to come back to Gale's bunk and sit with him. Like he wants to be invited.

"Come over here," Gale says.

John does, slowly, arms unfolding, body dropping onto the mattress again. Gale's knees brush against his thigh. There's a silence Gale doesn't think is all together bad. John takes one of the photos and holds it in the clutch of his palm so his fingers don't touch the photo paper. Wets his lips as he studies the two of them. Gale feels his ears

go hot.

"You thought...what, I only wanted you because you were dressed like a woman?" John asks.

"I...Jesus, Bucky, being dressed up like that," Gale says. "I didn't know which way was up. Nothing made sense half the time."

He doesn't know why this is so hard to say. Of course he thought that. The reasons behind it feel so enormous that Gale can't make heads or tails of them, so he can't begin to say the simplest part of all.

"I hated how people were looking at me." Gale swallows. "How other *men* were looking at me."

"Like you were a pretty dame?"

"Like I was a piece of meat," Gale says.

Mentioning the girdle and the stockings feels like something else he can't begin to talk about. He just told John he didn't want him to think of him as a woman, or want him as that. And he doesn't.

John's throat bobs as he swallows. "I didn't know it felt like that."

"I didn't either."

John nudges Gale's knees with his thigh and says, "I'm sorry if I ever made you feel like a pork chop, Buck."

Gale laughs and rubs at the skin of his jaw. They're here again suddenly, in the space of friendship.

"You can put the butcher paper away," he says. "You didn't."

John smiles. That free, earnest smile Gale always searches for. The one that creases his eyes. His hair is shorter now and there's no stray curl over his forehead but he's still the most handsome man Gale has ever seen.

"So, you don't mind me, Buck?"

"I don't," Gale says.

John's smile grows teeth. Earnest, still, but pleased. He scoots closer, thigh digging into Gale's kneecaps. He takes hold of Gale's hand. The flush in Gale's ears telegraphs to his cheeks. John is going to push, and

Gale is going to let him.

"Maybe you even like me?" John asks.

Gale has to look at their joined hands. "I do like you."

"Enough to stay married to me?"

Gale tenses. "Bucky. You don't want—"

"No," John says, squeezing his hand firmly. "No, no. Don't do that again. Ask me what I want this time."

Gale's tongue is swollen in his mouth. He doesn't want to ask, he wants to *tell.* They're not legally married. John didn't even ask Gale if he's queer. He's forgiven him too easily. He wants to tell him so much.

"What do you want, John?" he asks.

"I want to spend the weekend with you. Redo the wedding night."

Gale would stand up, if he could. His legs are too heavy. The fight or flight response he's honed so well seems to forget itself entirely. He doesn't move at all. As an angry burst of breath bubbles up his throat, Gale remembers himself. Remembers that this is John.

"How do you mean?" he asks.

"I mean take you to a hotel, treat a fella right. Treat you like my husband." John's thumb strokes over the tendons in Gale's hand. "That's what I want."

The part of Gale that is still boyish and unsure wants to ask John to repeat everything he just said. Ask if *he's* sure. The rest of him knows that he is, as sure as Gale is at this moment when he next opens his mouth.

"Alright," Gale says. "I'd like that."

John's teeth pinch his lip. "You don't have to if—"

"Since when do I do things I don't want to do?"

"You don't, Buck," John says. "Not ever."

He bends forward and kisses Gale's hand.

They're on a bus three hours later.

Gale's stomach is fluttery with desire the rest of the day. John stepped out after kissing his hand and came back after fifteen minutes and told him he made a reservation at The St. Anthony. Gale about dropped his shoes.

"The cast of *Wings stayed* there," John said.

"I know they did," Gale said. "How much is a room for the night? Jesus, John."

John shrugged, as if he didn't know. "We can split the cost. I promise it won't break the bank."

Gale didn't want to say no to him. He didn't want to say no to anything.

They packed a weekend bag. Didn't kiss again, hardly touched, exchanged secret, too-wide smiles.

And now they're on a bus. A bus, like the one they met on, rode on for days together. Gale knows what he wants but feels his courage start to slip as they ride into San Antonio. He's jittery, afraid of people looking at him for a whole different reason. They can't get caught or they'll both be sent home. John wants to fight just as bad as Gale does. And after? Gale doesn't know what that looks like, a life where he is queer and people might know. His mind jumps to five, ten years in the future. What if they go to war? What if they're shot down?

John knocks his shoulder into Gale's.

"Can hear you thinking," he says.

"What am I thinking?" Gale asks, caught.

John leans against his seat and studies him, head cocked.

"About room service," he says. "Steak and potatoes."

Gale smiles so hard he feels his lip curl up over his gums.

"Something like that."

He can't seem to catch his thoughts again, especially with John smiling at him, John bemoaning the lack of scratch paper to play tic tac toe. Gale doesn't even notice that they're in downtown until their stop is announced. Gale glances out the window. The St. Anthony towers in pale red brick and gold lettering. It is very likely the fanciest hotel Gale will ever go to in his entire life.

The lobby is startling, white pillars, shiny white floors, bellboys rushing back and forth. The low lighting makes it seem like they've left the city entirely. Gale waits by a wingback chair while John checks in. They've got tonight and tomorrow in a double room. John's stance is easy, relaxed, body leaning against the reception counter. Gale is still terrified. He thinks that might be part of the thrill, the desire to run away from John almost as equal as his desire to run to him.

John walks over to him swinging a key around his forefinger and smiling. He holds out a toothpick with his other hand.

"Swiped this for your collection," he says. "Might be the fanciest toothpick in Texas."

Gale swells with affection so quickly he nearly loses his footing. He goes dumb with it, the sudden, sharp realization that he loves John. He can't even say thank you, and John doesn't seem to be expecting him to, just squeezes Gale's shoulder and starts for the elevators. Gale slots the toothpick in his mouth and follows.

He doesn't say a word on the elevator.

He doesn't say a word in the hall.

He doesn't say a word as John unlocks the door to their room, footsteps muting under the lush carpeting. The room is darkened by the heavy drapes, two double beds made up nice and neat with pale blue bedding and deep mahogany headboards. There's even a telephone in the room. John sets his bag down and picks up the folded paper menu next to the telephone. He whistles.

"Would you look at that," John says. "They do have steak and potatoes here."

Gale kisses him. John hums into his mouth and returns the kiss, hand resting against the small of Gale's back until Gale breaks the kiss. He

didn't mean to, just couldn't hold it any longer.

"I'm sorry," Gale says.

John nudges a bit closer, nose brushing Gale's. "You apologizing for planting one on me?"

"For ever thinking you were only doing all this for a bit of fun."

"Gale." John's warm hands cup his jaw. "Gale, sweetheart, I know."

He pulls Gale in for another kiss. Gale relaxes into it, into the wet hot of John's mouth, body vibrating at being called *sweetheart* again after so long. He grabs at John's hips and feels where he's gotten a little firmer. John pulls back and Gale chases his mouth, knocks John into the bedside table. They both laugh, Gale still close enough that he can see where John has gone a little flush in the face.

"What do you want? You want to order dinner, Mr. Egan?" John asks. His hand rubs along Gale's back. "Or do you prefer Cleven-Egan? Egan-Cleven?"

Gale laughs against his lips, all breath.

"I'm not overly attached to my last name."

"Mr. Egan, then," John says.

Gale kisses him, keeps kissing him. He tries not to think about how they could've been doing this for the last two months. John is kissing him so good that Gale can't even remember what either of them was angry about at the moment. He yanks John closer by the hips, then turns them both and walks them towards the bed. John goes willingly, smiling into Gale's mouth as they tumble onto the mattress.

"That a no on dinner?" he asks against Gale's lips.

"What do you think, Mr. Egan?"

They're pressed chest to chest. Gale feels the rumble vibrate in John's lungs before he kisses him again. They're making out fully clothed like teenagers, and even though Gale wants more, he can't think about stopping to remove any of his clothes. He doesn't want to stop. He feels like he can't. John is the one who starts undoing his buttons, slipping Gale's jacket over his shoulders. Gale tries to kick his shoes off without looking and hears them drop onto the carpet. John's hands

untuck his shirt, slide over the length of his back, then down, come to rest at the swell of his ass before squeezing. Gale presses his hips against John's pelvis and groans.

"Christ," John says. "Buck, baby, tell me how you want it."

Gale feathers his lips over John's cheek, his chin, eyes closed. He doesn't remember shutting them. He mouths gently at John's throat.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—" John shivers under him, then one of his hands is in Gale's hair, demanding attention. "I mean what do you want to do? I'll do anything with you, yeah?"

Gale opens his eyes. He doesn't have to, to believe what John is saying. He can hear it in his voice, knows it, because he knows John. Anything Gale wants, John will give. Something is gripping his heart. A feeling almost like anxiety, almost like anticipation, and yet absolutely none of those things. If he could, Gale would take John down to a courthouse right now and marry him for real.

"If it's a wedding night redo, then it's a redo," Gale says. "So like the first time."

"We don't have to redo it exactly—"

Gale kisses John's throat.

"That's what I want, Bucky. But we can skip the bathroom, how about that?"

John smiles under him, his whole face.

"I'm good with that. Can I undress you?"

Gale nods. He rolls onto his side and lets John take off his shirt, unbuckle his belt. Watches as John unbuttons his jacket and matches him, a slow, unhurried discarding of their clothes. They're down to their skivvies, then completely naked. John seems broader in the nude, somehow, all shoulders, pale skin, his soft belly, cock hard and beautiful. He kisses Gale with a hand tucked under his chin, easing him back until Gale is lying underneath him, other hand rummaging in his bag for a tin of Vaseline that he sets on the bedside table but doesn't touch.

Now, Gale feels terrified again, nothing hiding him, some sick voice in his head telling him this won't work, only worked before because they were pretending. It can't work between two men. John kisses along his jawline. His hand rubs up and down Gale's flank.

"How'd a fella like you get to be so handsome, huh?" he says.

Gale blinks slowly, mind struggling to catch up. "What?"

John's hand spans over Gale's stomach, where he's mostly flat, sporting a bit more definition now from PT.

"I said how'd you get to be so handsome, Buck?"

Gale flushes. The tips of his ears burn, and it spreads fast to his cheeks. John releases his chin and spans both hands over Gale's shoulders, to his biceps. Here is where he's got most of his muscle, all that time in the oil fields.

"You've got such nice shoulders, so broad, so goddamn fit," he says. "You know the guys on base all wish they were as good looking as you, right?"

He bends in half to kiss the center of Gale's chest, where he's wispy with hair, but not as much as other men. Gale can't get his mouth to work to tell John he's wrong. To knock it off.

John slides down his body and his fingers take their time playing with the hair on Gale's upper thighs, as if John is in awe of Gale's body. Gale takes a breath and it shudders. His legs are so much skinnier than John's. Knees too knobbed. His shoulders aren't anywhere near as broad. He's always been like this, a reed of a boy turned into a reed of a man.

"And this," John says.

He wraps a hand around Gale's cock, half-hard against his stomach, and strokes him. Gale arches into the touch.

"You're winding me up," Gale says.

"I'm not. I just want you to know." John keeps stroking him, eyes focused on Gale. "You know, don't you? That I think you're handsome?"

Gale nods, frantic. He does believe John, is the thing. He digs his heels

into the bed, unable to lift his hips as much as he wants the way John is sitting on him. Gale could come from this, from John's singular attention and his hand on his cock. Can barely think about what this all means. What he was terrified of just minutes ago. John doesn't have to prove anything to him.

"Can I make you come?" John asks. "Please. Know I can make you come again."

"Yeah, yeah," Gale says.

John's hand speeds up, tightens the slightest bit. Gale tries to hold eye contact, but his eyes flutter shut, teeth pinching his lip as he lets himself go. He hears John say, "God, yeah, that's it." The bedspread is bunched up in his hands. When he opens his eyes again, John is already leaning down to kiss him, messy hand holding onto the firm side of Gale's hip.

"Goddamn," John says, and kisses Gale's cheek.

He's hard, cock nudging Gale's belly, but he doesn't make a move for the Vaseline. It's Gale who takes the steadying breath and hands over the tin, full up with nerves and want. He wants John inside of him. As if this is the first time. John dips a finger into the jelly and Gale lets him settle into the cradle of his thighs.

"It's our wedding night," he says, like the first time.

"You wish it was real?" Gale asks.

John's finger circles him. Hesitant.

"It is real to me."

His voice is soft, stubborn, like a boy waiting to be told no. He ducks his head and Gale reaches for him, his fingers gentle through John's hair.

"Real to me too. I meant legal."

"I don't need it to be. I just—" John kisses the side of his knee. "This is enough."

His finger is still toying with the edge of Gale's hole. He hasn't looked at Gale again yet.

"Hey," Gale says. "It's real. I don't need anything else."

John nods against his knee and finally looks at him, smile pulling slow and sweet. He pushes in, kisses Gale's knee again as he does so. Gale thought he remembered how this felt from last time. He was wrong. There's a burn, pressure, something tickling at his guts that makes him want to squirm. Ask for more before he's ready.

John is gentle. They work their way through the stretch together, trading kisses, Gale's hips and body opening more and more. He wants to keep John. The thought bullies its way to the front of his brain and stays there. He loves John, he wants to keep him, and he gets to. They're married. Gale can have this for the rest of his life, in whatever way it might look. He can't imagine flying without John. If he doesn't become a fighter pilot, Gale will become a bomber. It's that simple.

"Is it okay if I—" John starts, right as Gale says, "You can—"

John snorts and rubs the tip of his nose against Gale's.

"I hear you, sweetheart," he says.

He pulls out of Gale's hole with a wet sound that leaves Gale feeling empty, warm, a bit sticky. Watches John slick himself with more Vaseline and realizes that this really does feel like the first time all over again. His first orgasm has left him relaxed, but he's hard again, a little tense with nerves. John kisses his forehead and pushes his leg towards his chest with his clean hand, cock nudging at his entrance.

"Oh, god," Gale says.

He lets himself go boneless. John shudders against him, fucks into Gale's body and it must be the position, because he feels like he's deeper already, filling Gale up with a sort of mindless pleasure that has him clinging to John's back.

"Bucky," he says. "Jesus."

There's sweat on his fingertips, slicking their skin, scenting the room. John pulls out a few inches, not even all the way in yet, then thrusts shallowly, rocking Gale a little. He does that again, then again, before fucking all the way into Gale's body, flush against his ass. Gale keeps grabbing for his back like he can get into John somehow, knees bent up to his chest.

"You okay?" John asks.

"Yes," Gale says, hips tilting. "Yeah, move. John, move, please."

John does something with his hips again, rolls them, snaps them, Gale doesn't know. It just feels good. He moans low and breathless near John's ear, unashamed. John sets a rhythm and Gale does his best to meet him. He's pinned in a way he doesn't altogether mind, John's weight more a comfort than a shackle.

"Oh, god," he says, like he can't say anything else. "Oh, god, fuck."

"Christ." John's voice is all throat. One hand grabs hold of the underside of Gale's knee and pushes, opens him wider. "Christ, you look so good like this. You look so goddamn pretty taking me like this. Can I say that, sweetheart? Can I call you pretty? My pretty fella?"

Something about John calling him pretty sends so much heat to his groin he feels delirious. He bites the muscle of John's shoulder and moans into his skin. Nods around his teeth. He only lets go when John starts begging to kiss him, hands all over Gale's chest and neck. One moves between them to Gale's cock and strokes.

"You first," John says. "So I can feel."

Gale is already halfway there, sensitive from his first orgasm and hurtling towards another. John kisses him, strokes him, fucks him. Pulls back to say, "Come for me, Gale," not a demand but a request. Gale does. He arches into John's fist, toes curling as his legs close around John and he comes, slaps his palm over his mouth to muffle how loud he knows he's about to be. John lets him for all of three seconds before he pulls at Gale's wrist and frees his mouth.

"Oh my god," Gale says into the room. "*John*."

John kisses him. His hips snap, twitch, then John moans against Gale's lips and comes. Gale feels him tremble, empty out, kiss softening into something a little more languid. Then he kisses Gale's forehead again.

"You alright?" he asks.

A knot forms between Gale's brows.

"Of course I'm alright, Bucky."

John lets out a little bark of a laugh. It shifts him from where he's still seated inside Gale. He kisses Gale's nose and pulls out, sits back on his haunches, slick with sweat, cock soft. Gale drops his feet to the bed. His hips are stretched out. *Everywhere* feels stretched out, but he doesn't mind. John lays back down on the bed immediately and pulls

Gale into his arms. They're cuddling, Gale realizes. He lets it happen, doesn't want to put a stop to it anyway, even with John's come starting to leak out of him.

They doze for a while. Gale wakes up hungry and pleasantly sore. John is next to him, half-asleep, looking for all the world he'd be up for anything if only Gale suggested it.

"I would be interested in that steak and potatoes now, if you are," Gale says.

"You bet I am."

John strokes up and down Gale's arm, not yet moving. His eyes track his own movements. He is suddenly pensive and quiet. John's hand reaches for Gale's and slots their fingers together. Gale waits.

"Me calling you pretty earlier, was that okay?" John asks.

"It was," Gale says.

John nods, swallows thick.

"You remember when I told you I knew you were a man because I saw your Adam's apple?" he says. "Well, I lied. I walked onto that bus and thought you were the prettiest damn thing I'd ever seen in my whole life. I couldn't stop looking at you. I was watching you so much I noticed you weren't a woman at all. And I still thought you were the prettiest damn thing I'd ever seen."

Gale isn't sure how to respond at first. It's such an enormous thing, to know John had been holding that for so long. He's got John's hand in his own. They're in the same bed. John hadn't known he could love a man. Gale could say so many things. He decides on, "Never heard pretty as a compliment before."

"Keep fishing this pond," John says. "I got more, baby."

Gale laughs through his nose, feeling brave and safe and in love. He takes a breath. The room is mostly dark now, just the shine of John's eyes, the shape of him that Gale thinks he could find no matter where they were.

"You know, I...I didn't mind the stockings," he says. "I liked wearing them, actually."

When John doesn't answer immediately, Gale flinches, wanting to cover himself. Backtrack fast.

"I know it's not right—"

John sits up and switches on the lamp. Gale squints against the light, hand twitching from where John was holding him, half-afraid he's going to get up, and holding his breath when John turns to him and takes his face in his hands.

"Buck," he says. "Buck, look at me. I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

Even holding his breath, Gale manages to inhale.

"How can there not be?"

"Who's saying there is? Same people who say two guys can't marry each other?"

Gale clicks his mouth shut. He doesn't know, actually. His father, everyone, anyone. He never thought about who was saying that being queer was wrong, just that someone said so, therefore that was the truth of the matter. A truth he's lived all his life. John's thumbs pet his cheeks, one tacky from the Vaseline. He's smiling.

"What'd you like about them?" he asks.

Gale flushes. "Christ, I don't know—" the rest of the words jumble in his mouth.

John kisses him, thumbs rubbing a slow circle along Gale's cheekbones

"Could I buy you stockings again sometime, Buck? Put my hands on 'em?"

"God." Gale exhales, shaky, breath curling into John's mouth. "Yeah. If you—yeah, John."

He thinks John understands. Hopes he does, because Gale barely understands it himself.

John stares at him, eyes bright and wide, no response on his lips. Gale smiles around his hands.

"My god, John, did I just render you speechless?"

"Oh, shut up," John says. "Weren't you hungry?"

Dinner ends up taking them a while to get around to. They shower together first, and can't stop touching each other. Gale gets John off in long, focused strokes of his hand as the water goes lukewarm. He hasn't had the opportunity to just touch John, learn his cock. He likes it, the way John fits in his hand, how he holds Gale close under the shower spray and shivers and whines against him. Gale comes again just rubbing against John's thigh.

They eat in the dining room, steak and potatoes. A band plays slow jazz that Gale can't pay attention to. He watches John cut his steak into too-big bites and talk with his mouth full.

"Want to check out the Rainbow Terrace after?" John asks.

Gale swallows his potato. "What's that?"

"Ballroom they added to the top floor. Bet it's real swank."

"Alright," Gale says, and smiles when John blinks at him, speechless again, like he thought Gale was going to say no.

They finish up and head to the top floor, elevator dropping them at the top of a carpeted staircase and a large, open room playing swing music. The staircase curves down to what looks like a white marble floor. There's a bar in the center of the room and the band is elevated on the other side by the wall near the third chandelier Gale has counted. He doesn't move until John tugs on his elbow.

"Come on," he says. "I'll buy you a drink."

John settles an arm over Gale's shoulder and they walk down together, dip past dancing couples in a mimicry of dancing that Gale realizes is very much intentional. John lets go of him when they hit the bar and whistles for the barman's attention.

"Whiskey, neat," he says. "And a ginger beer for my friend, here."

Neither of them is in uniform. They blend in here, just two men having a night out, dressed in ties and jackets for dinner. Sitting at a bar with their drinks and watching people dance. Gale sips his ginger

beer and watches John watch. He's tapping his foot against the ring of his stool, eyes lit up. It sobers Gale a moment. They can't dance, at least, not the way they'd want to, a way that wouldn't draw attention to them.

"You can get out there, you know," Gale says.

John tips his whiskey back. The sharp bob of his throat catches the soft light.

"I'm good," he says. "Only one person I want to dance with right now."

"Jesus." Gale speaks into his glass. "Get you some crackers to go with that cheese."

John winks at him. "Hey, I'm just being honest."

"I know," Gale says, feeling less like he wants to be here now, and more like he wants to go back to their room.

And John must feel the same, because as soon as they finish their drinks, they head to their room. Get ready for bed side by side, almost like being in flight school, yet entirely different. John is in his pajamas first and holds the covers open for Gale to join him. The moment Gale crawls in, John throws an arm around Gale's waist, tugs him close, and kisses him.

"You gonna call me cheesy if I tell you that I've been looking forward to this too? Sleeping next to you again?"

"Yeah," Gale says. "But I like cheese just fine."

John's laugh is minty against Gale's lips. He kisses Gale again, then pulls back and says, "Goodnight, Mr. Egan."

Gale reaches blindly for the lamp and manages to switch it off.

"Goodnight, John," he says.

After breakfast the next morning, John calls home.

Gale isn't sure he's serious at first, not until they're back in the room and John picks up the phone. He clutches the receiver, cord looped

around his forefinger.

"Hey," he says. "Lucy, that you? Yeah, of course it's me, who else would it be! What? No, I didn't get kicked out of the Army, you little snot. I'm calling to say hello."

Gale sits quiet on the edge of the bed. He doesn't know when John last talked to anyone in his family. There's been a few pieces of mail, but Gale isn't the type of man to snoop. He's not sure why John is calling home now, either, and won't question it when John is smiling like this just talking to his sister.

"Louise is going with who? Tom Littleton? He better treat her right, Luce, or I'll fly back up there and knock him to Canada. Yeah, and tell him I said that." John laughs, voice still thick from sleep, then swallows. "Ma around? Uh-huh. Well, tell her not to worry or nothing. I'm fine. Oh yeah, I eloped actually, with some great gal named Gail, got her with me right now."

Gale nearly trips over his own feet standing up from the bed so fast. He reaches for the phone, furious and amused all at once, John trying to hold his laughter in while he dodges Gale's hand.

"Yup," John says, pulling the receiver away from Gale's grip. "And we —*Ma*, hi."

John goes still, so Gale goes still, panting softly, body pressing John into the bedside table. He can hear John's mother yelling into the phone, not quite close enough to make out what she's saying.

"No—" John looks to Gale, suddenly helpless. "No, Ma, it was a joke, I swear! I didn't elope with any girl! You can't talk to her, she's not here. It's just my friend Buck—no, that's not his real name, it's Gale."

John flushes and goes quiet. Gale presses the heel of his palm to his forehead, the fruit he had for breakfast now sitting in the base of his throat. John tugs at his collar.

"I don't know, I couldn't think of another name," John says. "Ma, there's no girl—"

Gale rips the phone out of John's hand.

"Hello," he says. "Mrs. Egan?"

John stands there with his hand still clutched around the receiver he's

no longer holding. Gale listens to the silence on the other end of the line, a woman's voice in the distance that must be John's sister, the sound of the radio. Finally, John's mother.

"Are you Gale?"

John's mother sounds nothing like him. Her accent is soft, shaky. Almost frail. And yet her tone suggests nothing about her would be frail.

"I am," Gale says.

"Well, you certainly don't sound like my boy John's wife."

Gale's cheeks pink. "No, I suppose I don't."

"And what do you think of all this?" Mrs. Egan says. "My Johnny running off to the Army and leaving his mother behind?"

"I think he wants to help people. I think that Bucky is someone who will do whatever he can to help people, because he's a good person."

Mrs. Egan is silent on the line. Gale wonders if he said the wrong thing. Next to him, John takes hold of his wrist, thumb stroking his pulse point. Gale would tell his mother everything, if he could. How much John helped him without even really knowing Gale at all, because he wanted to, and Gale loves him.

"You're his best friend, aren't you?" Mrs Egan says.

Her tone is more confirmation than question. Gale doesn't expect she's looking for an answer, but he says yes all the same.

"I expect you to look out for him, then."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll do that," Gale says.

"He already does that!" John shouts into the receiver. His mother says, "John! Give the poor boy a break."

"He can handle everything I give him." John winks at Gale, then sniffs, sobers. John covers Gale's hand over the phone so he can speak clearer and hear. "Do you forgive me for leaving?"

There's a sigh, the kind Gale has only ever heard from mothers.

"That's the thing with you John," she says. "You're always leaving. Like

you never wanted to be here in the first place."

"I'm coming back," John says. "You hear me?"

Gale hands him the phone so he can talk more privately. This isn't a conversation he needs to be part of anymore. Gale waits and hears John tell his mother that he loves her, he's coming back and he loves her, before he hangs up. The state of him so quiet and solemn that Gale doesn't have the heart to tell him off for saying something as stupid as "I eloped" to his sister just to rile his mother up. John turns around and pours himself into Gale's arms. He sighs, body going heavy.

"I'm not leaving you," he says. "Swear to you I'll never—"

"John," Gale says. "I know you're not."

John nods against him, face smushed into Gale's collarbone.

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

John sighs again. "I didn't mean...when I said I eloped with a girl—"

"I know, Bucky." Gale pets at his hair. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright." John's breath is humid against Gale's undershirt. "Next time I'll tell her I got a tattoo."

Gale snorts. That seems to be all the reassurance John needed, at least from him. He pushes himself up, smile taking up his whole face. Gale thumbs at the little mole on his chin.

"Get dressed," John says. "I want to take you somewhere."

Before Gale can ask where, John stamps his finger over his lips, then presses a little harder, asks permission with the tip. Gale parts his lips. Lets John slip his finger in to the first knuckle. Graze his teeth and sit over top Gale's tongue.

"It's a surprise, Buck," he says. "So don't ask questions. Just let me surprise you."

John removes his finger. Gale doesn't ask questions.

He takes Gale to the bus terminal. There's no reason for it that Gale can understand other than sentimentality, not until John stops in front of the photo booth. Even then, Gale still isn't entirely filled in.

"You want to take photos?" he asks.

"Well…" John draws the curtain aside. "I want to take wedding photos."

"What?"

Gale pulls the toothpick he's been working on from his mouth, afraid he'll swallow it. His voice is level, but he knows his face is telegraphing something beyond surprise. Disbelief, maybe. John sits in the booth, casual, and shrugs.

"I mean, if this is a redo, I think we ought to redo the wedding photos too," he says. "Take some where you don't got a wig on."

Gale pushes aside the practicalities. The fact that they shouldn't have those first photos to begin with, probably shouldn't keep the photos they're about to take. It's risky, it's all so goddamn risky. Gale doesn't give a damn right now. John thought of this. He wanted to give Gale a chance to have photos with him where Gale wouldn't have to be dressed up like a woman. The gesture touches Gales so deeply that he says nothing. He sits next to John in the booth and pulls the curtain shut.

"Want to split them?" John asks. "I've got a nickel if you've got another."

They each deposit a nickel into the slot. The machine whirs to life. Gale realizes they didn't even talk about what they wanted to do in the photos.

"Wait," he says. "How are we posing?"

John laughs. "It'll come to us."

He pulls Gale in by the tie and kisses him open-mouthed as the first flash goes off. Gale sees spots behind his eyelids. He stops thinking. He puts an arm around John and the two of them smile at the camera, temples pressed together as the second flash goes. John grabs hold of Gale's jaw after, and Gale thinks he's going to kiss him again, but all

he does is look at him, the two of them gazing at each other as the third flash snaps. Gale smiles around John's fingers. He starts laughing. Hears it when John joins him. They're both laughing when the final flash happens, then the photo booth goes dark again.

Gale kisses the edge of John's mouth before stepping out of the booth. The two of them huddle around the booth for the photos to develop and snatch the strip up as soon as the machine spits it out. John drags Gale to the side of the photo booth and blows on the photos as they come to life and reveal the two of them.

They look happy. They look in love. Gale can't believe he has a photo of him and John kissing. It terrifies him as much as he loves knowing that it exists.

"Aren't we a gorgeous couple," John says.

"Not bad at all."

John tucks the photo strip safely in his shirt pocket, near his heart, if Gale were looking to pay attention to that sort of thing.

They walk the San Antonio River after. The day is dry and cloudless. There are people all around them, children laughing and shrieking, couples lazing in boats down the water. Gale pays attention to the moments his and John's footsteps fall in sync. When John's bare arm brushes his own. He wants to look at their photo booth pictures again, and the photos from Doris as well. To not have to hide them. Two parts of Gale exist: the one that wants to get back to base and start flight exercises, and the one that wants to squirrel John away in a little ranch where no one will think anything is wrong with them.

Which is hiding. And Gale is done hiding.

They walk under a footbridge and stand under its shade a moment. John leans against the bricks. His hair is a touch loose from the pomade he used that morning and Gale wants to smooth it back for him.

"You should keep taking out girls," he says.

John watches him. He doesn't say anything, like he senses Gale isn't

done talking, and Gale doesn't know how John learned him so well so fast, but he did. Gale hadn't meant to start saying all this now, but he's started, so he can't stop himself.

"I don't mean go with them," he says. "But we shouldn't give anyone a reason to suspect something. Don't need a Blue Ticket."

The two of them step near the bricks to let a family pass, then John touches the small of Gale's back, soft and secretive.

"Always thinking worst case scenario, huh, Buck?"

His tone is lighter than Gale expects, like he's trying to brush this off, or hasn't given it thought. He told Gale yesterday he didn't know things could be serious between two men, but Gale has always known they could be. He's always known his feelings could pierce him to the bone if he wasn't careful. Maybe John didn't want to know. Gale felt like he had no choice. His father reminded him all the time what happened to men who were too soft.

"Guess I learned to, way I grew up."

John's gaze pulls off and to the water. Gale doesn't have to guess what he's thinking about. He also doesn't want to.

"You were right about my dad, you know," Gale says. "What you said in Colorado Springs."

"Don't know that I said all that much. Just that he shouldn't treat you like he did."

"It was more than anyone else ever did."

John's hand flexes against Gale's back, then shifts down until his thumb has slipped through Gale's belt loop to rest alongside his belt. He tugs gently, like he's making sure Gale is there with him. To anyone else, they're simply looking at the river together.

"You can't go saying that in public because I can't even comfort you the way I want," John whispers.

Gale smiles. "I'm okay."

"Uh-huh, I've heard that from you before."

John removes his thumb from Gale's belt loop and pats his hip as they step into the sunshine again. They're making their way back to the

hotel in a slow, lazy walk.

"I'll do it," John says. "Don't worry. I'll fill up the dance card of every dame in Europe, and I won't go home with a single one."

"You do technically have a wife." Gale sniffs and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "And a husband."

"That makes me sound like a bigamist," John says.

"Well," says Gale, teeth digging into his lip. "I thought you'd like that."

"Oh, you thought—"

John hooks his arm around Gale's neck and they scuffle on the sidewalk for a few seconds, legs tangling, until Gale digs his elbow into the meat of John's ribs and they release each other. John is red cheeked and smiling.

"Hey," he says. "I need to run a quick errand. Can I meet you back at the hotel in twenty minutes?"

Gale opens his mouth to offer to go with him, then stops himself. He smooths his hair back and nods. John wants to go alone. Gale trusts him. He's not going to ask.

"Twenty minutes."

Instead of fixing his hair, John fishes out the photo strip from his shirt pocket and tucks it into Gale's. His palm presses briefly to Gale's heart.

"Twenty minutes," he echoes.

Then he and his messy hair walk up the steps and onto the street.

Gale uses the spare key to freshen up in their room. He splashes water on his face, washes under his arms, and remakes their bed. They've had the Do Not Disturb sign on the door since they first checked in, rolled around in the second bed anyway to be safe. He sets the photo strip on the side table. Gale hadn't bothered to bring a book with him when he packed, so he's got the curtain pulled aside and is watching the street traffic below when John comes back.

It's been exactly seventeen minutes.

"Hi, sweetheart," he says, like he's walking into their house after coming home from work.

"Hi," says Gale, and looks at John's hands.

He's holding a little nondescript red box. His smile has gone from casual to nervous, thumb tapping against the box, and for a moment, Gale can't imagine anything other than rings inside the box. Wedding bands. Which they can't wear. Rings will invite too many questions they can't afford not to have the right answers for. Then Gale realizes the box is too big for rings. He pulls the curtain shut again.

John crosses the length of their room and holds the box out to him.

"I got you—" His hands drop. Whatever's in the box makes no sound. "You don't have to—but I just thought, maybe—"

Gale releases John from his own misery by taking the box out of his limps hands. There's a white ribbon tied around it that releases the moment Gale tugs on end of it. He opens the lid and looks inside.

They're stockings. Not the color Gale had worn when escaping Wyoming—these are still opaque, but so white they seem a little pink in color, Gale thinks they even might be that. The palest shade of pink. He pulls out the package and already knows what the silk is going to feel like in his hands. On his legs.

In front of him, John is chewing on his lip with his canine. Nervous and sweet and Gale feels blood rush to his pelvis at the thought of John wanting. Of being wanted so badly, and wanting just as much in return.

"You want to see me in these?" Gale asks.

"Yeah," John says. "Whenever you want to let me."

His voice is nice and thick. Gale swallows like the words were his own.

"Go wait on the bed, then, Bucky."

And John does. He sits immediately, doesn't do anything else, just sits. Gale drops the box on the chair with the stockings and loosens his tie, pulls it off. He unbuttons his shirt. Undershirt. Belt. Trousers.

Underwear. All of it goes to the floor with John watching. Gale watches him back as much as he can, until his fingers feel like butter, until John's gaze is too much. He thinks his flush is on his chest.

Gale opens the package and takes the stockings out. The silk so familiar under his hands. He feels about as much shame as he feels desire. He feels all of it. Has to pause a moment to stroke his cock before he can continue. Hears John inhale from the bed. Gale plants a foot on the arm of the chair and bunches up the stocking, body turned profile so John can watch. He doesn't think John ever had, before. Even if he had, it's different now. Gale slides the silk on and slides it over his foot, lifts the arch to avoid snagging the arm of the chair, then keeps sliding up over his ankle, calf, knee. All the way to the meat of his thigh, where he's hairiest, and the welts bite into the fat there.

He glances at the bed. John is still dressed.

"Take your clothes off," Gale says, and grabs the other stocking.

He pulls the other stocking on to the sound of John taking his clothes off. He's shimmying out of his undershirt when Gale is finished, finally naked and propped up in bed, eyes on Gale.

"Jesus," he says. "Buck, you got any idea what you look like right now?"

Gale doesn't. He's walking towards John in nothing but stockings and his dog tags. He wants to feel ridiculous, only John is looking at him like he's the prettiest thing in the world.

Gale straddles him on the bed and kisses him.

John pulls him in by the hip and neck, already kissing heavy and wet. His hand drifts from Gale's hip to the top of one stocking and fingers the silk there. Rubs hot. Gale breaks the kiss and shifts back and John follows so easily for him, adjusting his position to lie flat on the bed, dog tags and crucifix swept up by his neck along with the little pendant Gale still can't identify.

"What do you want?" John asks. He cups Gale's jaw, thumb petting his cheek.

"Want to take my time with you," Gale says.

"I'm all yours."

I know, Gale thinks, and kisses him again. Lets his body rest on John's. He pushes his leg between John's thighs and moves his leg up until his stockinged thigh brushes against John's cock. John shivers against his mouth. Gale moves his leg again, again, again. He can feel pre-come start to soak the silk of his stockings.

"Fuck," John says, "thought you wanted to take your time?"

"Thought maybe you wanted to come on my stockings?"

"I'll come wherever you want, doll."

Gale nips the fat bottom of John's lip, steals another kiss. He reaches for the Vaseline on the bedside table and John doesn't stop him, just watches, hands all over Gale's waist and ass. Gale sets the tin on the bed and kisses John's neck, down to his chest. He does want to take his time, but he can feel John's cock against his own chest and it's making him impatient and delirious with desire. Gale drags his mouth down John's stomach to where his cock is dribbling pre-come and licks some up. He thought the taste would be saltier. John is almost sweet on his tongue.

"I've never really done this," Gale says, unsure if it needs saying.

John's hands rake gently through his hair. "You're doing fine. Better than fine."

"Barely done anything."

"Already the best I ever had," John says, then after a pause: "I know, cheese."

"I got crackers," Gale says.

They smile at each other, then Gale licks over the head of John's cock and hears, "Oh, baby, sweetheart, just like that." He licks again, then closes his mouth over the head and takes the base of John in his hand. His jaw already feels open too wide and Gale doesn't care. He wants to make John feel good. He bobs his head a few times, listens for the sounds John makes to know what he's doing right. Which is, apparently, everything. John's hips keep twitching, hand gripping Gale's hair tighter, voice straining more and more.

Gale loves the feel of this. John's pleasure in his hands. He allows more and more of John to fill his mouth, until it feels like too much, then a little more. Gale finds the Vaseline again and unscrews the lid.

John laughs above him, halfway through moaning, clearly into the direction Gale is going.

"You want to give me your fingers, Buck?" he says.

Gale nods around his cock. He wants to do both at the same time, only stops when John touches his jaw and gently lifts his chin. Gale licks his lips and kisses John's fingers as John pulls his knees up and open.

"Here," John says. "Take your time. All yours."

He winks. Gale wishes it didn't make him flush. He supposes one day it won't, the way John is so open and affectionate. Unashamed. Gale lubes up his finger and slides it down behind John's balls, right to where he's spread himself, all tight and hairy and Gale's. Gale circles around the pucker of him, then John says, "Come on, please, come on," so Gale does. And he's the one who gasps when his finger disappears into John's body, when he sees it happen.

"Oh, Jesus," Gale says.

Above him, John sighs, relaxes. Gale takes that as a sign to move. He pumps his finger in and out, slow, steady, watching and listening for John to tell him what else he wants. John's back makes a neat little arch, cock all shiny wet from where Gale had his mouth on him.

"Another, Buck," he says.

Gale gives him that. Two feels like a lot, even if it might not be for John. Gale works him that way, watches John shift his hips down against Gale's hand to try and take more of him, seek out what he can. Gale grabs his thigh and squeezes, so turned on it's nearly choking him. He wants John back in his mouth but doesn't think he can manage that from this angle. There is something oddly safe about John's knees on either side of him, the valley of his body laid out for Gale to curl into.

He could take more, but this is what Gale wants for today, to know John like this right now, how his body works like this. Gale stays with two fingers, fucks John like that even as his wrist starts to ache.

"Christ," John says. "Jesus Christ, Gale, you're killing me. What are you doing to me, baby?"

"Taking my time." Gale kisses the side of John's knee. "Do you want to come on my hand or in my mouth?"

"I don't care—*god*—you decide. You."

Gale already has. He wants John in his mouth again. He pulls his fingers from inside John's body and takes him back into his mouth as quickly as he can, more confident this time, more relaxed. Just more. John's shoulders lift up from the bed and his legs close around Gale's body. As he starts shaking, Gale doesn't stop.

"God, I'm gonna come." John fists Gale's hair. "Gale, *oh*."

The feeling of John coming in his mouth has Gale moaning. He holds himself there as John shivers through the aftershocks, huffing out breath after breath. He swallows and sits up to ask if that was alright. John kisses him before he can. Pushes Gale onto his back on the bed like he didn't just come. Gale can tell that he's smiling into the kiss by the amount of teeth he feels in his lip.

"Buck," he says. "Goddammit, Buck. Let me look at you."

John sits up on his knees. For a moment, Gale nearly forgot he was in stockings. It's all he's thinking about now, and all he can feel now, the silk on his legs, and John's gaze on him.

"What are we gonna do about this, huh?" John says.

He drags his finger up Gale's cock. Gale's legs twitch. He feels like he's already halfway to an orgasm and has been since he put the stockings on. John grabs the elasticized welts at the top of the stockings and snaps them against Gale's thighs. It's a little bite of pain, not even really pain, a sting that has more blood rushing to his dick and some pathetic sound rushing out of Gale's mouth. John exhales heavily even though he's soft between his thighs.

"Turn over," he says.

Gale shifts onto his stomach. Faced with the other side of the room, he can see the oval mirror by the dresser, his own body on the bed. Can see John behind him, then his head as it ducks down. Gale furrows his brows. He feels John spread the cheeks of his ass but still isn't prepared for it when John licks over his hole.

"Oh, fuck," he says, and drops his forehead to the sheets.

"That okay?" John asks.

Gale nods before realizing that John can't see him. He has to say

something.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

John bites the swell of his ass quickly before licking at him again. Gale makes a sound into the sheets that he can't identify. He can't even identify the feeling of what's happening other than *good.* John licks again, a broad stripe, before he grabs tightly to Gale's hips and flicks his tongue back and forth in quick succession. Gale shudders and realizes that he's whimpering. He wants to rut against the bed and can't because John is holding him in place, tongue barely penetrating him, teasing him, then spearing into him and leaving him mindless.

"Bucky," he says. "John. *Fuck*."

He's afraid he's going to kick John on accident. Even with the bedsheets muffling him, Gale feels like he's being too loud and he can't stop himself. When John finally pulls back, it's both a relief and something Gale wants to beg again for. Then John is on him a second time, relentless, tongue licking him up. Gale shoves a hand between himself and the bed and touches his cock. A few strokes later he pushes back against John's mouth and comes.

His legs feel worn out and all Gale did was lay there and let John take care of him. He pants against the sheets, breath coming back to him. Hears John panting. John kisses the shell of Gale's ear, mouth all wet. Gale can't figure out his angle until he feels John's erection pressing against the small of his back. He's hard again.

"Sweetheart," he says. "Was that too much, or can I fuck you?"

"Don't be an ass," Gale says.

John's laugh is hot and breathy in his ear and all he gets out before Gale lifts himself on his elbows and pushes John over on his back again. Gale straddles him and John pulls him down for a kiss.

"I was being sincere, ya know," he says.

"I know."

Gale hands him the Vaseline. He stays in John's lap as John opens him up, already knows this is the way they both want it to be. They work Gale onto John's cock together, slow, easy, until he's got John inside

of him again, John's hands on his stockinged thighs. On top like this, Gale can set the rhythm, which is good, because he's soft now. Sensitive. He moves with his hands tangled in John's dog tags.

"God, you feel good," John says. "My pretty fella. My husband."

Gale rolls his hips and John's dick drags along that spot inside of him that makes him feel like he's going to come too fast, too hard. His cock twitches, still soft. He searches it out again, blunt nails drawing red marks down John's chest.

"And who am I?" John asks.

Gale laughs, breathless. "Mister, I hardly know you."

John grabs the welts of the stockings and snaps them. Gale's laugh dissolves into a moan that grows louder when John snaps his stockings again. He does it enough times that Gale goes half-hard, feels desperate, like he might come, though he knows he can't again so soon. John holds his stockings tight and encourages his hips up and down. Gale strokes himself, whimpers.

"You'll ruin them."

"I'll buy you a hundred more pairs." John wraps his hand over Gale's. "Let me see you come."

"Jesus, I'm not even—I can't," Gale says.

"Yes, you can," John says.

He sits up, and that throws Gale's legs open wider, seems to let John's cock push a little deeper into him, tuck right against where it needs to be and set Gale off. John fucks into him, hips working, the whole thing too good and too much.

"God, I—" Gale doesn't know what he's trying to say. "I'm—John, *please*."

He spasms, comes between their stomachs and doesn't even know how. His orgasm rips through him and keeps coming, has Gale curling in and knocking his forehead against John's shoulder. It's too much and he wants more, gets more, then everything stops and Gale is so tired he thinks he would collapse if it weren't for John against him. He shakes and shakes in John's lap.

After a few minutes, John rolls him onto his back, eases out of him, and takes himself in his hand. He jerks himself hard and fast, says, "God, Buck, Buck, *Buck*—"

He comes all over Gale's stockings. Right there on his hands and knees. Gale feels his spend soak the silk. He loves it, and maybe John was wrong, maybe there is something unnatural about all this, but even so, Gale doesn't care.

Once John gets his breath back, he rolls Gale's stockings off for him. Tenderly, as if they'll be used again. He manages to look proud and bashful at the same time. Gale feels sweaty and exhausted. The room is stuffy. Everything reeks of sex. There is Vaseline and come on the sheets. He might be concerned about that, if he had the energy.

"You alright?" John asks.

"Better than."

Gale curls up next to John on top of the sheets. He means that. Better than.

"What time do we have to be back tomorrow?" John asks in the bath. "Early, right? I bet it's too early."

"Evening, actually."

"That's too early."

Gale hums around his toothpick, relaxed enough that he won't argue that point. He thinks it's the toothpick John swiped for him. They're sat in the bath together, backs against the tub, knees poked out of the water like the fleshy roofs of houses. Evening tomorrow does feel too early. Seems as if the two of them have only just gotten to the hotel. Tomorrow, they have to figure out if they'll keep or throw out their wedding photos. They have to be a secret. Gale knows he should ask what that looks like, the two of them being careful, but he's so happy right now that he refuses to. He lets his knee knock against John's, affectionate.

"You look like you're about to melt over there," John says.

Gale hums again. "Feel like it, too. Bath feels nice."

"Certainly wasn't anything else that made you feel this relaxed."

Gale laughs and shuts his eyes. He listens to the water ripple as John washes himself, sighs when John runs the washcloth over his own skin, the quiet rasp, the smell of citrus.

"Did you think I had rings in the box?" John asks.

Gale opens his eyes. John washes his chest for him, reverent, eyes on his task. The thought of him being shot down is impossible. Unimaginable and unendurable. Gale has always appeared sensible to anyone who doesn't really know him. But he knows he's not, because he thinks to himself now that he won't let John get shot down, not before he does. He simply won't.

John rinses Gale's chest and moves his dog tags out of the way. Gale rolls his toothpick in his mouth.

"Might have."

"I'm not that sentimental," John says. "I know we can't wear rings. I don't need all that, anyhow. Already told you—it's a real marriage to me."

It's a real marriage to me. Gale's heart flips over. He knows then that they won't keep the photos they took. They'll likely rip them to unrecognizable pieces and scatter them to the wind. Take another set in a different photo booth. Maybe destroy those too, fertilize the earth that way, years and years of temporary snapshots, and Gale wonders if that's what a future is—moments he looks forward to remembering in fragment.

John is looking at Gale like he's got something else to say. His thumb and forefinger pluck the toothpick right from Gale's lips and toss it over near the general direction of the sink. He starts talking again before Gale can grumble about his toothpick.

"Buck," he says. "I've been thinking, and I figure, the Warhawk is a solid plane—"

"No."

Gale stops lounging and sits upright in the tub. Water sloshes over the lip and onto the tile. John sits back, skin beautifully pink from the

warm water.

"What?"

"I said no," Gale says. "I'm going to be a heavy bomber."

John sits there a moment with his mouth hanging open. "You're going to—since when?"

All the blood in Gale's body pumps back to his heart. He feels it, his heart beating, this big, loud thing inside him. The burden of how he must use it. The privilege.

"Since I decided I like the big birds," Gale says. "I fell in love with a big bird."

John moves to him again, like he's swimming through the water, smiling curling his face. He's got three smiles, Gale realizes, his mouth, and both eyes.

"Did you now?" John says.

"I did."

"I fell in love with you too," says John, and kisses him.

Gale grabs the lip of the tub to stop from sliding down and licks his way into John's mouth. They'll get dinner later, he thinks, maybe go for another walk, or see a film. They'll come to this room and make love, and tomorrow they'll leave. Very likely, they'll go to war. John kisses Gale's mouth one more time. Then his forehead.

The next morning, they wait for the bus back to base together. A respectable distance apart, but Gale doesn't mind. The morning is already warm. John is beautiful in the sunshine. He lights a cigarette as the bus rolls up and nudges Gale's arm.

"Do you want to sit next to me?"

He makes like he's bashful, chin wedged against his shoulder. He means right now. Later. For the rest of forever.

"I do," Gale says.

John smiles over the fresh smell of diesel.

"Cheese," he says.

Gale laughs, shoves John forward.

"Crackers."

They board the bus together.

Chapter End Notes

if you follow me on tumblr you know why this didn't go up when i planned!! ♥

huge huge huge thanks, like the biggest thank you of all time to @steeseman for beta reading this, and to @swifty-fox for drawing this art i still cannot believe.... love is real....

thank you very much for reading xx

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!